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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. NUMBER 21

The Thinking Machine Affair



by Joel Bernard

Napoleon and Iliya are enmeshed in a desperate fight against a machine that controls men's minds.

CHAPTER ONE

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

PROFESSOR Karel Novak was in deep thought as he sat in the comfortable armchair in the living-room of his modern villa, a building standing in a quiet tree-lined street of the Prague suburb of Dejvice. As his pretty twenty-five-year-old daughter, Vlasta, entered the room and placed his favorite meal on the table, he hardly noticed her, and her words, "Dinner's ready, father," did not reach him.

At any other time the delicious smell of the well-prepared rump steaks with all the usual trimmings would have prompted him to cross hurriedly to the dinner table to enjoy his favorite food; but now, as he sat in his chair, the inviting smell didn't seem to entice him at all. He was too absorbed thinking about his new invention.

"Your dinner's getting cold, father," Vlasta said, a little annoyed that her father had not joined her by now. "I've taken a lot of trouble to get the steaks cooked to your liking, so, please, don't spoil my good work."

"I'm sorry," the Professor said, looking at her startled; "I didn't notice..."

He pulled himself up from the armchair and went to the table. "It looks delicious," he said as he took up his knife and fork. As soon as he'd tasted the food, he exclaimed: "It is delicious! You're a marvelous cook."

Vlasta was happy seeing her father eating with such relish for she had been worried about him. During recent weeks his health had begun to deteriorate, owing to his being so preoccupied with his project, and he had seldom eaten anything. Now, seeing how much he was enjoying the steak, she resolved to coax him in the future with his favorite dishes and so help him to regain his lost strength.

As they drank coffee and ate the chocolate gâteau she brought in, the Professor said with reproach:

"I shouldn't really be sitting here eating so much of your excellent gâteau; I should be working in my laboratory..."

"No, you shouldn't," Vlasta interrupted. "Good food and rest will do you a world of good."

"I know," he admitted. "But I seem to have arrived at a stalemate with my work. Whatever improvement I make, it still doesn't work out exactly as I intend it to do. And you know, if I'm unable to show some striking results pretty soon, the Government might stop my future research and insist on my being engaged in other and perhaps more speedy exploration."

"I've never asked you on what you're working because I know that your research is classed top-secret," Vlasta said, "but if you'd like to talk about it with me, perhaps we might be able to get over one or two obstacles together. Of course I haven't got a fraction of your knowledge and experience, but I am a qualified electronics engineer and research worker and sometimes someone with less knowledge and experience might spot something that eludes the top expert."

Her father remained silent, delving once more in his thoughts to find the missing step to the full success of his project. Vlasta misunderstood the silence and said:

"I shouldn't have said that—I should have realized that you can't talk to me about your secret work."

"What did you say?" her father asked, obviously not having heard her remark.

"I should have realized that you can't discuss your secret work with me," she replied.

"Nonsense, dear, nonsense. Of course I can, but it's a fantastic project—very complex," he assured her.

"I wouldn't expect you to embark on something simple, father." She knew that only the most complex problems ever interested him.

"Well, to tell you the truth, when the thought of 'Project I.P.', as we call it, first entered my mind, it appeared rather simple to me and I thought I'd be able to complete the whole thing very speedily," he admitted. "And when I actually started on it, and constructed the first apparatus, it seemed as if my expectations had been right, that it would be a short-term research venture. You see, almost right from the start the thing worked, but only at a very short distance, only a few feet away. I managed eventually to extend the working radius, but the result is still far from what I intended to create. My intention is to see 'Project I.P.' operate over an unlimited distance, and as efficiently as it does at the present limited radius."

"What is the actual purpose of 'Project I.P.'?" Vlasta asked, encouraging her father's mood to talk.

He hesitated, then he said, simply: "Well, it's a sort of thought transference apparatus."

"A thought transference apparatus?" the girl repeated in surprise. Professor Novak nodded.

"Excuse me saying so, father, but what does anyone need a thought transference apparatus for?" she demanded.

"I expected that its perhaps inadequate and possibly misleading description would make you wonder whether I've lost my sense of proportion and judgment," the Professor sighed, as he sipped his coffee. "'Project I.P.' means 'Project International Peace'. I believe I have found the way to secure lasting peace throughout the world—

provided I succeed in truly perfecting my invention so that it does all I want it to do."

"It certainly sounds interesting," the girl said. "But how could it do such a wonderful thing?"

"Yes, I see you can't figure out how it can work." Her father smiled at her incredulous tone. "I'll try to explain my idea in the simplest possible way so that you understand what I have in mind."

Vlasta herself was qualified in electronics and accustomed to grasp complex matters, but she humoured her father's attitude towards her as if the ABC of his scheme had to be explained in simple words before she could understand.

"Science has established that thoughts are measurable vibrations," her father began; "if we accept this, it should be possible to feed thoughts into a machine or apparatus and transmit them to others. I studied every available scrap of information which the Soviet Research Institutes in Leningrad, Kiev, Tiflis and other Soviet cities released, and the more information I gathered about the thought vibration, the more I acquainted myself with the subject, the more the idea grew of creating a machine, an apparatus, or call it what you wish, that could be used to transfer *constructive* thoughts that would make people do the *right* things."

"One could describe your invention as an apparatus for hypnotizing people in any part of the world from a center point here in Prague!" Vlasta observed.

"You could call it that, but strictly speaking, it is not exactly hypnosis," the Professor went on. "But it doesn't matter what we call it—all that matters is that it should work. And, if I succeed and my apparatus proves to be capable of sending out positive thoughts to any part of the world, then there is no doubt that the continuous danger of world wars could become a matter of the past and that lasting peace could be made to prevail."

"It's a fantastic dream!" Vlasta said, after a moment's pause. "Although I never studied the subject of thought vibrations and the possibilities of sending positive thoughts around the world, I agree that if you accomplish your aim you'll create the most important invention mankind has ever achieved. To think that people all over the world could be made to stop thinking of wars, to disarm, to forget race and other hatred, and live in peace with each other! Think of the multi-millions of currencies now daily spent on armaments, maintaining armed forces, and waging local wars, instead being used for health research, education, social amenities, the arts, and culture—it's so wonderful that one is afraid to even hope!"

"It will come true one day, my child, it will," her father assured her. "I know what I'm talking about. My invention works perfectly

within a limited radius, and I am almost certain that before long I shall find the solution and achieve unlimited distance thought transference."

It was now Vlasta's turn to be silent, and as, for a time, Professor Novak watched her, he assumed that she was trying to figure out how to overcome the stalemate of his experimental research. At last, as the silence grew, he felt he had to ask what she was thinking about.

"I was considering that your invention could actually be used as a two-sided weapon," she replied. "For instance, some unscrupulous power could get hold of it and use it for bringing other people under their yoke, instead of using it for world peace. That would be terrible."

She paused a moment, then continued:

"Some ruthless clique might want to condition the minds of other people to their own way of thinking. They could, without a drop of blood being shed, turn our country, or the Soviet Union, or any other land, into their satellite, and bring it under their control. It is horrible to even think that any freedom-loving and social-minded nation might be subjugated to fascism or some other form of ruthless dictatorship—the mere thought of it makes me shudder..."

"That is why my 'Project I.P.' was given top-secret clearance," the Professor explained; "that's why our villa is guarded day and night by hand-picked armed security officers, and why I am the only person who knows all the details of my experiment. Our Government is only too well aware of the grave dangers which my invention might constitute if it fell into unscrupulous hands, and consequently every humanly possible precaution is being taken to safeguard the world from terror or destruction. My invention is designed to help humanity, not to harm mankind, and that is why I have complete Government backing—both as far as finance and security are concerned."

"Let's only hope that no one else has the same lead as you have and that no one else works on exactly the same project as you do," Vlasta said. "If there were any scientists working on such an apparatus and if they were already more advanced than you are, it could well turn out that, for money gain, they might sell their invention to any unscrupulous elements prepared to pay any price for this sort of power..."

"There's no need to fear that anything of the sort could happen," her father stressed, anxious to put her mind at rest. "At present the only experts who are engaged in research of thought vibrations are Soviet scientists and research workers, and their experiments and findings are well-guarded. I only learned this because of my friendship with Professor Smirnov who heads this type of research in the Soviet Union. But, despite our close friendship, even he only provided the really important research data when both our Government and the

Soviet Government decided to support my idea of inventing an apparatus for the transference of positive thought to any part of the globe. So you see, even if anyone anywhere in the world should embark on the same research, it would be years before he, or they, could arrive at the point where our scientists and research workers are now; and that means they would be too late. Once my 'Project I.P.' is perfected, 'World Operation Lasting Peace' will commence immediately and, once this is done, there isn't anything to worry about any longer."

Vlasta accepted the wisdom of her father's words. "You say that your apparatus works satisfactorily within a certain radius?" she asked after a short pause.

"Oh yes, without the slightest hitch," the Professor confirmed.

"How big is that radius at present?"

"About two miles." On sudden impulse he proposed: "Would you like to see it working?"

"I'd love to!" she exclaimed.

Professor Novak led her to his laboratory, which was secured by a solid steel entrance door with a security lock to which only he knew the secret combination. Before working the complex dials, he disconnected the alarm system, for this was linked with State Security Headquarters by electronic connections to inform them if any unauthorized person was trying to gain access to this top-secret laboratory.

It was Vlasta's first visit to this part of her father's villa.

She saw that the spacious room was lit by bright fluorescent lights, the large windows secured by thick steel plates harnessed to the same electronic alarm systems which were linked with state Security Headquarters. As soon as they entered, Professor Novak locked the door behind them. "One must always be prepared for every eventuality," he said. "We must be sure no one else enters." He unlocked the heavy, built-in, burglar-proof safe, removed something, and placed it on the table which was in the middle of the room.

"So that's your 'Project I.P.'," Vlasta exclaimed admiringly. "I didn't expect it to be the size of a portable wireless set—somehow I had imagined it to be a huge thing with plenty of dials and all sorts of gadgets."

"In actual fact," the Professor explained, "the final version—when all problems are solved and everything works to my complete satisfaction—will be even smaller. My ultimate aim is to reduce the machine to half or even one third of its present size."

He plugged the apparatus into an electric socket on the opposite wall and began turning some dials and working tiny levers. Fascinated, Vlasta watched his every move, trying to figure out how

'Project I.P.' operated.

"I am ready for the experiment," her father said at long last. "If you care to name any of your friends or acquaintances whom you wish to receive your thought transference, we can go ahead. But mind, at present the distance cannot be further than about two miles."

"We could try Marie Diouha," Vlasta suggested. "She lives about a mile from here, and it's most likely she's at home."

"Where does she live?"

"Petrin Street 15, second floor, the flat on the right."

"What message do you want to send her?"

"Well—" Vlasta thought a moment and then said:

"Send her a thought message to phone me immediately and to suggest that we go to the Roxy Cinema."

Professor Novak checked to see that the telephone was plugged through to the laboratory, then went to his apparatus and began to work some dials and levers. When he was satisfied that the scene was set for his experiment, he said aloud:

"Marie Diouha, telephone Vlasta Novak immediately and suggest that you and she should go to the Roxy Cinema."

As soon as he had finished the spoken message, he switched off the apparatus. Then he explained:

"Under ordinary circumstances I would just have sent out a concentrated thought message, because it is unnecessary to speak a message aloud; but in this particular case I wanted you to hear that I was transmitting the message you asked me to..."

He was interrupted by the shrill sound of the telephone bell on his desk.

"Shall I take the call?" Vlasta asked.

"Please do. It ought to be Marie."

And it was Marie Diouha!

"I'd actually planned to stay at home tonight and watch the television play," Marie said, "but I suddenly thought I'd phone and suggest we go to the Roxy Cinema. Would you like to come? The film had quite a good Press."

Vlasta made some excuses and declined the invitation. When she replaced the phone receiver, she cried enthusiastically:

"This is almost unbelievable! You have invented and built something tremendous, father! I wouldn't have thought it possible."

"Still, so much has yet to be done before my goal is achieved," sighed the Professor. Then he brightened. "But I am confident I shall succeed. You see, at first the apparatus would transfer thoughts only inches away; then the radius improved and it worked on people yards away; now a distance of about two miles can be covered. I have no doubt that I'll succeed in over coming any distance in the future."

"I am sure you are right, father. I only wish you'd let me help you with your calculations and experiments. Maybe I'll stumble on something that might eventually help you solve your problem."

To her delight, he instantly agreed.

"I should be happy if you would assist me," he said. "But one thing must be understood between us. It must remain a secret that you are in any way connected with 'Project I.P.' If someone learned that you were assisting me, hell would break loose, because, you know, all the Government officials are obsessed with security-phobia, and without special security clearance and consent no one is allowed to gather the inside knowledge of my work."

That same evening they began experimenting with new calculations and adaptations of the original apparatus, convinced that the time must come when all present obstacles would be overcome.

CHAPTER TWO

LONG NOSES AND BIG EARS

THE Monitoring Officer of the Electronics Department at THRUSH'S European Center E lit another cigarette as he checked the long-distance electronic listening device beamed at Professor Novak's villa in Prague Dejvice. He was tired of keeping this leading Czech scientist, rumored to be engaged on top-Secret research, under round-the-clock electronic audio surveillance.

The Monitoring Officer had good reason to be fed up with the task he'd been given. Since the day three months earlier when THRUSH Intelligence had unearthed the fact that the Professor's villa had been turned into a miniature fortress and that he had been classified as being on top-secret research, it had been the Monitoring Officer's duty to record every sound in the villa. But this task had been frustrating because the only words the listening device had overheard and recorded on tape were harmless everyday conversations between father and daughter, unrevealing telephone conversations, or brief contacts with people who came to the villa. It was obvious that Professor Novak was the only scientist engaged on this particular project, and it was annoying that he never spoke about his work to his daughter or anyone else. For these reasons the long nose of THRUSH, as well as its electronic ears, were having very little luck.

Then, quite unexpectedly, on the day of Professor Novak's fiftieth birthday, THRUSH'S patience was rewarded. The Monitoring Officer's ears overheard the conversation which took place at the Novak's dinner table, and which suddenly turned to the Professor's work. In this way they had discovered the secret the villa held.

The Monitoring Officer felt elated when, in the early hours of that morning, the Professor and his daughter decided to stop work. The THRUSH electronic listener reproduced the sounds of footsteps, the noise of the locking of the safe and the laboratory's heavy steel door. The Officer was now able to report to his Chief Organizing Officer some unique information of real importance and some detail—an unexpected stroke of luck which could mean promotion for him.

His hands trembled with excitement as he pressed the knob on the closed circuit television set that linked his monitoring room with his superior at THRUSH'S office. As soon as the latter appeared on the television screen, he reported proudly:

"Sir, I have obtained the requested information and data on Professor Novak's research. Do you wish me to play the tape for you?"

"Send me the tape. I'll listen to it here," came the curt command,

and the Chief Organizing Officer switched off the circuit.

He hasn't said a single word of praise or expressed some appreciation, the Monitoring Officer grumbled to himself, but as he rewound the tape, ready for his superior to play back, and then placed it in a metal container which he sealed, hopeful thoughts ran through his mind. Perhaps once the Chief realized the importance of the news, he would praise and reward the work he had done. As he dreamed of promotion, he put the package containing the tape into a special channel which had been constructed to connect with the Chief Organizing Officer's office; through this tapes and other items could speedily and privately be transported in either direction.

Later, when the Chief Organizing Officer had listened to the tape, he at once realized that immediate action was imperative. There was no doubt in his mind that an instant THRUSH Executive Council meeting must take place. He sent out appropriate commands which would at once convene the extraordinary meeting. This done, he flashed the necessary signals to the Armed Guards Commander at THRUSH'S European Center E to prepare for this meeting.

As he approached the door of his office, the two steel sections slid silently into the surrounding walls, permitting him to enter the corridor where two armed guards stood watchfully. As soon as he had passed the door, the invisible electronic eyes moved the steel plates silently back to the closed position.

The guards escorted him on his way towards the elevator which was at the end of the long, well-lit corridor with its numerous steel doors on either side. The elevator doors opened automatically and as soon as the three men entered, shut silently behind them. They descended at high speed to the eighth floor, where the doors again opened automatically.

Once more the Chief Organizing Officer and his two armed guards walked along a seemingly endless corridor, until at last they reached a closed oversize steel door in front of which stood half-a-dozen armed guards of higher rank. They stepped aside to allow the officer to enter the Conference Room; concealed electronic eyes having opened the door for him.

The Executive Council members of THRUSH arrived in rapid succession and the council was in session less than fifteen minutes after it had been convened.

"Information of extreme importance prompted this meeting," said the Chief Organizing Officer, opening the convention. "I now propose to play a tape recording containing the said vital information so that the Council may decide what steps should be taken."

After the assembled members had unanimously concurred with the proposition, the loudspeakers reproduced the sounds and words

registered on the monitored tape.

"This calls for immediate action," the Executive Council's Chairman announced, once the tape had been heard. Turning to the Chief Organizing Officer, he questioned: "How do you propose to get the Professor and his apparatus to our Headquarters?"

"The simplest and speediest solution would be to send a special task force to the villa and bring him and the apparatus here," the Chief Organizing Officer replied.

"Before arriving at any final decision on the operation, we should take into consideration the danger of a self-destruction gadget having been built into the apparatus, to prevent it falling into unauthorized hands," warned the Head of THRUSH'S Technical Department. "If this were so, forceful action might induce the Professor to destroy the apparatus, and thus thwart our plans."

"There's no indication on the tape of any self destructing gadget on the apparatus," the Chief Organizing Officer countered.

"That doesn't establish that there isn't one," the Technical Department head insisted. "The tape gives us a very good idea of what the invention is, and how the apparatus works, but it doesn't give us all the answers. If you listened carefully to the tape, you'd know that no opportunity arose for the Professor to say whether or not a self-destruction gadget is built in. Under the circumstances I must insist that we take every safety precaution to ensure that we get both the Professor and his apparatus undamaged."

"Regardless of whether there is a self-destruction Unit or not, I am against a special task force being sent to the Professor's villa," the Executive Council's chairman declared. "I want the operation to be smooth and unnoticed. I want no disturbance that might alert Government Security forces. I propose that we use the information we have from the Ultimate Computer and carry out the operation smoothly."

"I'm not with you, sir," the Chief Organizing Officer said uneasily. "I have no knowledge of this Ultimate Computer data."

"You can't have it because I haven't made it known to anyone yet," the other replied sharply. "It would have been premature. But now, in the light of this important development, the time has come when all members of the Executive Council must know the facts to enable us to arrive at the appropriate solution for the problem."

The eyes of the assembled men were now fixed on the speaker.

"The information from the Ultimate Computer is as follows," the Chairman continued. "Professor Karel Novak's wife Dana was killed in a road accident in 1946 and left him with their five-year-old daughter Vlasta. He brought up the girl, whom he loves more than anything in the world. Here is the means of getting at the Professor and his

apparatus without creating any special disturbance. Bring his daughter here, and the rest will be simple."

"This solution is doubtless best," the Deputy Chair man seconded after a moment. "I suggest it be accepted unanimously."

"There's only one thing to be considered and it is that, despite his great love for his daughter, the Professor might not after all be persuaded to come over to us with his apparatus." This was the opinion of the Chief of the Special Tasks Department. He liked the initial proposal made by the Chief Organizing Officer because it gave him the chance of displaying the efficiency of his Task Force section. "We mustn't overlook the fact," he added, "that Professor Novak is one of the most devoted of Czech Government scientists. Because of this, he might put his country before his love for his daughter..."

"I don't think we need worry about that. We know from experience how well the hostage method works," the Deputy Chairman insisted. "However, should it turn out to be a futile *modus operandi* in this case, we can then switch to the Special Tasks Force for assistance."

It was unanimously moved by THRUSH'S Executive Council that Vlasta Novak be brought to their European Center E.

"This, I think, concludes our extraordinary meeting," declared the Executive Council Chairman. "All other matters can be dealt with at the next extraordinary meeting when the Professor's daughter has been brainwashed and conditioned for our plans."

"There is one thing that, I think, should be decided at this meeting," the head of the Technical Department intervened.

"What is it?" the Chairman inquired.

"We have learned from the tape that Professor Novak is faced with stalemate in the development of his apparatus, and from what we've heard it seems unlikely that he and his daughter will quickly stumble on the solution to this vital problem."

"I am confident that, aided by you and with the help of your assistants, Professor Novak and his daughter will certainly solve that problem, once he and his apparatus are safely here," the Chairman cut in.

"That may be, but I'm afraid there's not much chance of us being successful, because none of us here have the slightest knowledge of this thought vibration transference business." The Head of the Technical Department looked wry. "By trial and error we might of course solve the problem sooner or later; but I consider it my duty to point out to the Executive Council that it may take a very considerable time before Professor Novak can achieve his goal."

"Have you any constructive idea on the subject?" the Chairman enquired.

"I have, but this entails overcoming enormous difficulties."

"We are used to overcoming such difficulties," the Chief Organizing Officer remarked smugly.

"Let's hear your idea and decide whether it is acceptable," said the Chairman.

"My idea," the Head of the Technical Department announced, "is to strike first at U.N.C.L.E. because I believe that U.N.C.L.E. is our principal antagonist and must be wiped out before they can interfere with us."

"What has U.N.C.L.E. to do with Professor Novak solving the problem of long-range thought transference?" the Chief Organizing Officer demanded.

"My idea is to overcome Professor Novak's stalemate by linking his apparatus to an electronic beam transmitter and thus attacking the target," the technical expert explained. "But this is where the enormous difficulty comes in. My idea can only work if we can install special electronic beam receivers in the electronic communications circuits inside U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters. To do this, one of our people must penetrate U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, and that, you will agree, is certainly a great task."

"If this is all that's worrying you, put your mind at rest, for it can be done!" the Chief of the Special Tasks Department exclaimed. "The only difficulty would be the actual installation of your special electronic beam receivers within the electronic communications circuits at U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters."

"The installation of such gadgets shouldn't be difficult, for they are so tiny that they can be fixed anywhere along the circuits. As they are equipped with magnetic claws, no complicated fixing is required," the technical expert elucidated. "The man who has to install the beam receivers must of course know where to find the electronic communications circuits at U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, but once he knows the layout and penetrates U.N.C.L.E.'S stronghold, everything else will be simple."

"Under the circumstances," said the Chairman, "I invite the Executive Council to move that 'Operation U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters', as we may as well call it, commences immediately, to make ready for thought transference to U.N.C.L.E. as soon as Professor Novak and his apparatus arrive here."

This motion was approved, then before adjourning, the meeting proposed that the three chiefs involved should meet to finalize the details of 'Operation U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters'.

Ten minutes later the Head of the Technical Department and the Chief of the Special Tasks Department met the Chief Organizing Officer and were discussing the problems before them.

"To eliminate all possibility of failure, it is imperative to know every detail of the U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters," said the Chief Organizing Officer. "If you agree, I propose to feed all the relevant questions into the Ultimate Computer to obtain the necessary data."

Following this, questions were fed into the Ultimate Computer, and soon this information began to stream out.

The U.N.C.L.E. Organization (United Network Command of Law and Enforcement) is centered in a row of buildings in New York City, a few blocks from the United Nations Building. Starting from the south end, this row consists of a three-storied whitestone which appears fairly new in comparison to the brown stone buildings which make up the rest of the street. At the north end is a public garage an active, bustling place in parking-space-starved New York. The brownstones are occupied by a few lower-income families living above the decrepit shops and businesses which rent the space on the street level. Del Floria's tailor shop occupies the street level space in a brownstone near the middle of the block. The first and second floors of the whitestone are taken up by an exclusive "key-club" restaurant named "The Mask Club" which features fine food served by waitresses wearing masks (and little else) to patrons who don masks (covering nostrils to brow) as they enter.

On the third floor of the whitestone is a sedate suite of offices, the entrance to which bears the engraved letters U.N.C.L.E. And in this suite of offices a rather ordinary group of people handle mail, meet, and do business with visitors, in general giving the appearance of some normal organization engaged in a special charity project, or perhaps a Fund Foundation Headquarters.

If one were to investigate (but thoroughly), he might learn that all these buildings are owned by U.N.C.L.E. It is doubtful that he would ever discover that all the personnel involved in the activities of the garage and the key-club are also in the employ of U.N.C.L.E., that many of "The Mask Club" are affiliated with U.N.C.L.E. that even the frowzy tenants of the brownstone, including old Del Floria, the tailor, are actually members of the organization.

If it were possible to peel away the outer, decaying, brownstone skin of the four old buildings in the middle of the sandwich (as it were), a surprising edifice would be revealed. For behind the walls is one large building consisting of three floors of a modern, complex office building—a steel maze of corridors and suites containing brisk, alert young personnel of many races, creeds, colors and national origins—as well as a complex mass of modern machinery for business and communications. There are no staircases in the building. Four elevators handle vertical traffic. Below the basement level an underground channel has been cut through from the East River, and

several cruisers (the largest being a sixty-footer) are bobbing at the underground wharf beneath the brownstone complex. If one could ascend to the roof and examine the large neon-lighted advertising billboard rearing up there, a trained eye might ascertain that its supporting pillars conceal a high powered shortwave antenna, as well as elaborate electronic receiving and transmitting gear.

This is the heart, brain and body of the organization named U.N.C.L.E. The personnel of the organization is peculiarly multi-national, its line of work so tending to cross national boundaries, and with such nonchalance, that a daily shortwave message from the remote Himalayas fails to flutter any eyebrows, even though there is no recorded wireless in this Himalayan area according to the printed international codebooks.

On making one's way through the building, one would find it highly discomfoting to stray from within certain prescribed boundaries, which are measured by the color of the badge the "Admissions" clerk has pinned upon one's lapel. A chemical on the tips of the receptionist's fingers would have set up a reaction on each badge as she pinned it in place. Any persons passing through certain areas of the building will trip up an alarm unless they are wearing a badge which has been properly activated. On every desk in the building a small red light would begin to flash and a signal is heard beating in a repeating tempo of alarm. Steel doors would then start to slide shut all over the building, forming cabinet-like pockets in which to trap any unwanted intruders.

The Red Badges will admit you to the ground floor which contains personnel and equipment for day in, day out routine operations. Should a Red Badge manage to rise above this floor, the entire unpleasant sequence of events described earlier would occur.

The Yellow Badge will carry one anywhere on the ground and second floors. The second floor contains communications equipment of all sorts as well as various electronic code devices and, in general, any machine equipment necessary for the organization. By now you understand what occurs should a Yellow Badge venture onto the floor above.

The third floor is White Badge territory, with the Policy and Operations offices, the interrogation rooms, the armory, and the various cubicles occupied by the elite of this organization, the Enforcement Agents, during their infrequent visits to this, their home base.

If such a thing as an Organization Chart of U.N.C.L.E. were to exist, it might be found to break down the personnel into five Sections—each Section subdivided into two Departments, with one Department overlapping the Department below it. Thus:

SECTION I: Policy and Operations

SECTION II: Operations and Enforcement

SECTION III: Enforcement and Communications

SECTION IV: Communications and Security

SECTION V: Security and Personnel

There are four entrances to the Headquarters Area. The basic personnel enter through the public garage they drive their cars into the garage, along with the general public, and park them. At this point the paths of these (for the most part, attractive) men and women diverge from that of the "ordinary" patrons. The men make their way into the "Men's Locker" room, the women into the "Women's Locker" room. Behind a wall there is an elevator which descends to a subterranean passage leading to the brownstone area. Here an "Admissions" clerk sits at a desk scanning her closed circuit television receivers, which beam in the findings of hidden cameras in each locker room. "Admissions" will fix the Red or the Yellow Badges and the Admittee moves on to his (or her) respective work area.

The Enforcement Agents will enter through the second entrance, which is located in Del Floria's tailoring shop. Each Enforcement Agent will enter the shop and usually hand Del Floria his jacket for pressing. The tailor will then push a small button on the side of his pressing machine. This releases the "lock", and the Agent will enter the third "try-on" cubicle and draw the curtain. He will turn the hook on the wall (really nothing but a door knob), swing open the back wall and walk through to the "Admissions" desk. "Admissions" would by now have seen his entrance on her closed circuit television viewer. She will fix the White Badge and the Agent is then free to move to an elevator and rise to his floor.

The third entrance is to be found in the general offices above the restaurant in the whitestone building. Here is where the non-U.N.C.L.E. members may be brought in the brownstone area. At the rear of the suite of offices is an elevator. If you are permitted to, you may enter the elevator, which will take you back down to the first floor. A door at the rear of this elevator will open there, admitting you directly into the brownstone building. "Admissions" would, of course, have been watching you in her closed circuit television viewer as the elevator was traveling down and she will fix the proper colored badge to your visitor's lapel.

There is a fourth entrance through the underwater channel in the basement of the building. Of course this entrance can only be used either by boat or a scuba suit—both methods inadvisable unless you are expected. "Admissions" waits for you here, too, with her badges. This entrance (and exit) is generally only used for extremely top-secret movement of the personnel.

The top man at the U.N.C.L.E. organization is Mr. Alexander Waverly of SECTION I. The Policy Department of this section consists of five men of various nationalities, Mr. Waverly being one of them. His office is on the third floor of the brownstone enclave. The only window in this entire fortress is in this office. It lends itself to a panoramic view of the East River with the United Nations Building centered in the middle of the frame...

At this point the Ultimate Computer stopped pouring out the information, and its signals indicated that the "machine with a brain" was ready to be fed with additional questions.

"Having now all the necessary details on U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters," said the Chief of the Special Tasks Department with satisfaction, "we need to know ways and means to penetrate the fortress, where exactly the live nerves of U.N.C.L.E.'S electronic communications systems are situated, and how and where U.N.C.L.E.'S closed circuit and other alarm systems can be put out of action."

His companions agreed, and these new questions were fed into the Computer, which in due course gave out the required information.

"That's it, then!" the Chief Organizing Officer exclaimed. "We can proceed with immediate preparation of 'Operation U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters'." He turned to the Head of the Technical Department and enquired:

"How long will it take you to have sufficient electronic beam receivers ready?"

"Give me twenty-four hours and we'll have more than we need."

"And how much time will you need for training a man to fix your gadgets to an electronic communications circuit?"

"Inside an hour."

"Well, under the circumstances pick your best man and explain the task to him."

In this manner, the scene was set at last for "Operation U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters".

CHAPTER THREE

THE VISITOR WITHOUT A CALLING CARD

ALEXANDER WAVERLY, a lean, dry, somewhat pedantic man in his early fifties, was sitting in his third floor office at U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, studying a lengthy report from one of his Enforcement Agents in South America. As he sat there, engrossed in the report, he looked like a professor who might specialize in Renaissance history.

He glanced up from the dossier, selected a bulky briar pipe from a rack on his desk and with his fore finger began to fill tobacco into it from a round container. Pressing the tobacco down into the bowl of his pipe with his thumb, he rose and crossed to the window. He stared out at the panoramic view of New York's East River where, from the middle of the tangle of roofs and walls, the United Nations building soared upwards like a huge glass replica of an oblong box.

Waverly was about to put his hand in his coat pocket to fish out a matchbox to light his pipe, when the alarm system went into action, announcing that an intruder had somehow slipped through the safety barriers into U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters. He returned to his chair, placed the unlit pipe on his desk, and switched on the closed circuit communications system to find out what was happening.

"Has the intruder been located?" he enquired calmly.

"Not yet, sir," the information clerk replied. "But he will be, any minute now. Our control room confirms that he was detected by our security devices as he approached the area near the booster-boxes of the electronic communications system and that the protective steel doors slid shut immediately and trapped him in one of the sections."

"Let me know as soon as he's located, will you?" Waverly requested. "I want all details as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir," the clerk replied.

Waverly connected with the office of U.N.C.L.E.'S Chief Enforcement Agent, Napoleon Solo. "Mr. Solo, I'd like to see you in my office," he said when Solo appeared on the screen.

"I'll be over right away, sir," Solo answered.

Waverly leaned back in his chair, wondering how the intruder had managed to bypass alarm and security devices and penetrate almost to the heart of the electronic communications system. This was a serious matter, and indicated that there was room for improvement in U.N.C.L.E.'s safety system.

Napoleon Solo knocked before entering Waverly's office.

"Mr. Solo, I want you to be present at the examination of the intruder as soon as he is located," Waverly said. "I want to know

everything about the man and his motives..."

He was interrupted by someone at the door. An attractive brunette entered, and as she handed Waverly a buff foolscap folder, Solo gazed approvingly at her shapely outline. The girl wore a short navy blue skirt and dark nylons, and her silk blouse was creased in the right places. Solo smiled and unconsciously raised his hand to smooth his dark hair as her blue eyes caught his.

Another interruption followed. It was the information clerk, to inform Waverly over the closed circuit communications system that the intruder had been located.

"Bring him to the interrogation room," ordered Waverly.

"Very well, sir," the clerk said, and switched off.

Napoleon Solo headed for the interrogation room. Waverly remained seated, to open the buff foolscap folder the brunette had brought in a little earlier.

Not long afterwards, Solo reappeared in Waverly's office. The frown on his face betrayed that the result of his talk with the intruder had been far from satisfactory.

"Well?" asked Waverly.

"I'm afraid, sir, the intruder collapsed and died before I had the chance to learn anything from him," Solo reported.

Waverly picked up the briar pipe from his desk and held it in his right hand, as if considering whether to light it or not.

"I searched him and found several of these tiny gadgets in his hollowed-out heels," Solo continued. He placed a small metallic object on the desk. "I have sent a sample to the Technical Investigation Department for analysis. The body is also being examined to establish the cause of death and to see whether anything can be found that might provide a clue of any kind."

Waverly picked up the gadget and examined it. "It looks like some electronic bugging device or something of the sort; but we should have the answer soon," he said confidently.

The U.N.C.L.E. medical section went to work to establish what fast-acting poison had killed the intruder, a muscular six-foot man in his early thirties, whose body had already confirmed that he had been in excellent health until the moment of his death. Assisted by highly-skilled biochemists, the medical team examined blood and saliva samples.

"The man isn't dead," Dr. Griffith Evans, the chief biochemist, eventually pronounced. "It's an identical case to the one we had some time ago."

Dr. Frank Morris, who headed U.N.C.L.E.'S medical team, understood what the biochemist meant. He well remembered the incident some time back when another man had collapsed and died in

the interrogation room. The result of the blood and saliva examination were identical with those taken now. Before the corpse could be buried it was claimed by "relatives" and transported to THRUSH Headquarters, where Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin later discovered that the "dead" man had been brought back to life and his full health restored by an antidote then unknown to the U.N.C.L.E. experts. But now U.N.C.L.E. had in fact obtained this antidote that it was possible to restore the life of the intruder.

Dr. Morris gave Waverly his findings.

"How long do you think it will take until the man is back to normal?" Waverly asked.

"I've no knowledge of how fast the antidote works," the doctor replied, "but taking into consideration the unique physique of the man, and also the fact that the poison could not yet have taken a very firm grip on the blood and vital organs, I should think he might be revived within a few hours."

"Go ahead then, and let me know when he's ready for questioning, will you?" Waverly terminated the conference with these words. Then, looking at his Chief Enforcement Agent, he added: "From the start, the whole business smelled of THRUSH. No one else could have bypassed our outside detection devices. Now we'll discover what they're up to and hit back at them—and mighty hard, Mr. Solo."

"Isn't there a danger, sir, that by reviving and interrogating the THRUSH Agent we might alert THRUSH and do more harm than good?" Solo observed. "Wouldn't it be better to let them think we don't know anything and let them have their corpse when some fictitious relative comes to claim him?"

"Mr. Solo, you seem to have acquired the art of thought reading," Waverly said dryly. "I was just going to propose the same thing. As and when the 'dead' man starts to regain consciousness we'll put him into deep hypnosis so that he is unaware of having been interrogated etcetera..."

There was a knock, and Fred Harris, U.N.C.L.E.'s technical expert, entered. Somewhat long-windedly, he reported:

"The gadgets are specially constructed electronic beam receivers, sir, capable of receiving ultra-short wave beams from a distant transmitter. They are very similar to electronic beam receivers which were discovered some months ago at THRUSH Eastern, only these are much smaller, and, I dare say, more effective."

"Interesting," Waverly commented.

Harris went on to explain: "I am sure that the purpose of these electronic gadgets was to use U.N.C.L.E.'S complete internal, and possibly also external, communications systems for receiving electronic beams transmitted from a distance. All the intruder needed

to do was to fix these gadgets, which are provided with magnetic claws so that they stick firmly, to cables, boosters, etc., and our internal and external communications systems would have then been perfect receivers for any communication that some distant THRUSH Center..."

"I am aware of it," Waverly interrupted Harris impatiently. "I am familiar with all brainwashing methods—electronic and otherwise—so you needn't elaborate. But what I want to know is whether or not the intruder succeeded in fixing his gadgets anywhere on or near the communications systems."

"We have recovered one on the intercom cable, and there's no doubt that it was this electronic beam receiver that set the alarm system in motion," Harris told him. "My theory is supported by the fact that additional gadgets were found on the intruder. It is obvious he was trapped before he had the chance to complete his job."

"It's dangerous to rely on theories," Waverly grumbled.

"I know, sir," Harris concurred. "Every single inch of the internal and external communications systems is being examined and so are the surrounding areas and electric supply links. We are not relying on theory alone but are taking every precaution. Still, I believe the search will prove my theory and establish..."

"Thank you, Mr. Harris, that will be all for now," Waverly again interrupted. He was very impatient. As the man, visibly nettled, turned to leave, Waverly recalled him to say: "There's another thing, though, that puzzles me."

"Yes, sir?" Harris enquired.

"How was it possible for the intruder to evade the closed circuit television eyes and other alarm devices and penetrate so deep into our headquarters?"

"Well, sir," the expert returned, "these little electronic beam receivers can also be used for the interruption of closed circuit television and other alarm and safety devices. This incident has now established that a super-safety circuit, as we call it, must be provided—the same type of safety circuit that set off the alarm system when the beam receiver was fixed..."

"Thank you, Mr.—ehm—Harris," Waverly said. "I take it you'll put the necessary work in hand without delay?"

"It is already in hand, sir. It is being carried out as top priority."

The door closed behind the man as he departed.

Waverly took the buff foolscap folder from his desk and said:

"I wonder if this is in any way connected with our THRUSH intruder?"

Napoleon Solo looked at his superior with blank eyes, although it was obvious that Waverly wanted him to enquire what he meant.

"I'm referring to a report from Prague which came in only a short while ago," Waverly continued.

"Yes?" the agent prompted.

"It's a report on the sudden and mysterious disappearance of a young Czech scientist a woman named Vlasta Novak—who has been engaged in some secret Government research."

Solo almost blurted out, "The daughter of Professor Karel Novak who's working on some top-secret project," but stopped himself, unwilling to interrupt his superior.

"This young woman is the only daughter of one of the best scientists the Czechs have, a man called, ehm, Professor Karel Novak, who's engaged in some hush-hush research in his villa in a Prague suburb." Waverly told Solo what the U.N.C.L.E. Chief Enforcement Agent had already discovered. "She left the Research Institute where she worked to return home, but she never arrived there. Czech State Security at once started a nationwide hunt for her, but she seems to have disappeared without trace."

"Perhaps she managed to slip across the frontier before her disappearance was discovered," Napoleon said. "She wouldn't be the first scientist to slide under the Iron Curtain."

"Nonsense!" Waverly said rather rudely. "This young woman is so devoted to her father that she wouldn't think of leaving him. No, Mr. Solo, the mysterious disappearance of this person reeks of THRUSH. The alarm on her disappearance was given half-an-hour after she left the Research Institute, and half-an-hour is too short a time for anyone to get from Prague over the frontier. Taking into consideration the effectiveness of Czech State Security, which covers the whole country, and also the fact that the young woman seems to have disappeared from the face of the earth, I would say that she's held at THRUSH European Center, and I'd also say that the Center ought to be somewhere near Prague."

Waverly paused for a moment and Solo added:

"And, I think, you'd also bet that our intruder, when eventually handed over to his 'relatives', will lead us to this particular center."

"Well done, Mr. Solo," his superior said. "There's only one slight miscalculation in your conclusion. Instead of 'will lead us' you should have said 'will lead Mr. Kuryakin', because he will be following the corpse, and you will fly to Prague to keep an eye on the Professor and be around if THRUSH should try and get him."

"When do I leave, sir?" asked Solo promptly.

"Now."

"Shouldn't I wait for the outcome of the interrogation of the intruder?" It was going to be a pity to miss his pretty date for the evening, Solo thought wistfully.

"Mr. Solo, we are quite capable of doing the job professionally, even without your valuable assistance." Waverly grunted aggressively. "If there's anything special you ought to know, I'll contact you."

Accustomed to his plans being changed for him so often, Napoleon turned to leave the office.

"Good luck, Mir. Solo," Waverly said benevolently. Alone again, Waverly crossed to the window and looked down on the East River. He stood there, thinking.

The sudden buzzing sound of the closed circuit communications system broke into his meditation and brought him back into stone-cold reality. It was Dr. Morris, telling him that the THRUSH agent was regaining consciousness.

"I want him brought to the interrogation room and I want you to come too, in case additional medical assistance is required," Waverly ordered. He then summoned Clive Hughes, U.N.C.L.E.'S hypnotist and Chief Interrogator.

Minutes later, Alexander Waverly, Dr. Morris and Clive Hughes stood in the interrogation room looking at the man on the stretcher. To the untrained eye he still appeared lifeless, but the doctor explained: "He's not yet able to hear, understand, see, or sense, but he will be regaining consciousness quite rapidly."

"I want him to be in a state of hypnosis so that he doesn't know he has been brought back to life, nor anything else that will be happening," Waverly told Hughes. "Is that understood?"

"Perfectly," the other acknowledged. "When the interrogation is terminated he'll believe he is just being revived."

"No. I suppose I haven't made quite clear what I want you to do," Waverly countered. "I want you to put him in a state of hypnosis so that he does not know, and will never remember, that he was brought back to life by us. When the interrogation is terminated I want him to be given another dose of the THRUSH poison to create the impression that we have never revived him."

"I understand now," Hughes said.

"Can it be done successfully?"

"Certainly."

"I'm afraid, Mr. Waverly, we might fail," Dr. Morris said dubiously.

"You have got the THRUSH poison which he took when he was trapped?" Waverly enquired.

"Yes..."

"Well, what are you worried about then?"

"I'm worried that the double administration of the poison might really kill him. He has an extremely strong constitution but..."

"We'll have to take the risk," Waverly cut in impatiently.

As the two men were talking, Clive Hughes was already hypnotizing the motionless prisoner. At first he was unsuccessful, but as life began gradually to flow back into the body, the hypnotist's efforts met with more success. After some tests he confirmed that the man was in the required state of deep hypnosis, ready to be interrogated.

"I want you to make him believe that he's talking with the Chief Organizing Officer at his THRUSH Center," Waverly instructed.

The hypnotist complied with the order; the consequence was that, asked for an account of his mission, the man on the stretcher unhesitatingly submitted his report:

"I did not encounter any obstacles and landed at New York without attracting attention. As per my instructions I proceeded to U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters and established that the Ultimate Computer's information was accurate.

"It was correct that the electronic beam receivers, which I affixed around myself in the manner suggested by the Ultimate Computer, rendered useless closed circuit television eyes and all the additional alarm systems. Admissions never spotted me and I had no difficulty in slipping into the building through the underground entrance.

"I also succeeded without difficulty in affixing eight electronic beam receivers on all the points suggested by the Ultimate Computer. I can consequently confirm that the entire internal communications system at U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters is now equipped with the electronic beam receivers and ready for receiving any communication sent from European Center B.

"I must report failure as far as U.N.C.L.E.'S external communications system is concerned. The reason for the failure is my own carelessness and I am ready to accept appropriate punishment.

"When I affixed the last electronic beam receiver on the intercom cable at point G and prepared to fix the remaining eight beam receivers on the external communications system, I overlooked the fact that I must not pass any of the points at which I'd affixed the beam receivers because, as the Head of the Technical Department had warned me, the beam receivers on my body would create an ultra-force and set off the alarms. This is what happened. As I passed point H where I had placed the beam receiver, the alarm went and I was trapped in a steel door pocket which seemed to come from nowhere. I took the living death drug phial and a few minutes later my mind went blank.

"That is all I can report on my partly-successful 'Operation U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters'. But before I took the phial and lost consciousness, I hid the unused electronic beam receivers in the hollowed-out heels of my shoes. I believe the U.N.C.L.E. investigators

did not find the beam receivers in my shoe heels when they searched my body.

"That's my report, sir, and I am ready to submit to any punishment the Disciplinary Committee may impose upon me for having only partly carried out my task."

Clive Hughes continued to pretend he was the THRUSH European Center's Chief Organizing Officer. "I want you to describe the exact locations where you affixed the electronic beam receivers so that I can check the chart and ascertain whether 'Operation U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters' was indeed carried out to our full satisfaction," he said.

The hypnotized man described the location of the various gadgets he had planted, and this information was passed on to the technical team so that they could check whether any of the dangerous receivers had been missed. It was soon confirmed that all the gadgets had been discovered and removed by the search team even before their exact locations had been disclosed.

In the role of THRUSH'S Chief Organizing Officer, Hughes asked: "Are you satisfied that the U.N.C.L.E.'S internal communications system is now ready to receive and pass on effectively any transmission from European Center E that is beamed to the receivers you affixed?"

"Yes, sir, definitely."

"You are very confident, but have you taken into consideration the sort of transmissions U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters are to receive?" Hughes wanted to extract as much information from the hypnotized man as possible.

"Well, sir, I don't know much about it. I only know what the Head of the Technical Department told me, which is that the Professor's apparatus is to be linked with an electronic transmitter beamed at the electronic beam receivers at U.N.C.L.E.'S internal and external communications systems. I'm afraid that's all the Head of the Technical Department told me, sir."

"You seem to have forgotten the Professor's name," suggested Hughes.

"Oh no, sir. It's Professor Novak."

The interrogation continued, but it was soon clear that the man had been drained dry of all he knew.

After Clive Hughes had conditioned the man's mind to permanently forget his awakening moments and only remember the happenings that had occurred before he took the phial and lost consciousness, he ordered him to fall into a deep sleep.

"I want you to fix one of our miniature electronic direction finders somewhere on the man's body, where it cannot be discovered even if their greatest expert goes over him," Waverly told Dr. Morris.

The doctor examined the man's mouth. "We're in luck," he said. "He has a large filling in his lower right molar. We could take it out, insert the direction finder and re-fill the cavity," he suggested.

"Make sure the filling doesn't look new," warned Waverly. "I wouldn't want them to spot the direction finder by noticing a brand-new filling."

Dr. Morris looked at Waverly as if to say, "I don't need that kind of reminder," but only said: "It'll be carried out expertly. Don't worry."

"You spoke earlier of the possibility that a new dose of the poison might kill the man," Waverly said.

"Yes."

"If this happens, would a pathologist who has full knowledge of the poison be able to discover that the man had been given the poison again?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't answer that one. I haven't sufficient knowledge on how the poison works, nor how it affects the human body."

"Never mind," Waverly sighed. "As I said before, we have to take the risk of the man actually dying. I want the body to be ready for collection by the funeral directors in about an hour's time."

"Right," Dr. Morris acknowledged.

Waverly returned to his office to summon Illya Kuryakin and brief him on his new assignment. "I'll make the necessary arrangements for the City Funeral Directors to collect the body and I want you to take charge of the affair from then onwards," he said.

Two hours later, the funeral directors called at the U.N.C.L.E. office on the third floor of the whitestone to collect the body, and Illya was ready at his well-picked observation post when the closed van arrived and the coffin was carried into the funeral parlor.

Later, Illya stepped into a deserted doorway, took out his miniature shortwave transmitter-receiver, and said: "Open Channel D."

Within seconds, Waverly replied.

"A relative has claimed the body, sir," Illya reported.

"Arrangements have been made to fly the body tomorrow morning to Vienna, on the scheduled eight o'clock plane. I've booked a seat on it and will report from Vienna."

Channel D closed, and Alexander Waverly sat back in his chair.

CHAPTER FOUR

"DEAR DADDY—COME AT ONCE!"

THE Chief Organizing Officer at THRUSH'S European Center E made no attempt to conceal his anger. He ranted at the Chief of the Special Tasks Department for having given Vlasta Novak too much of the odorless gas.

"Almost twelve hours have elapsed since she was brought here and there's no hope of her regaining consciousness for hours yet!" he bellowed.

"How could anyone anticipate that she'd pass out so completely?" the Special Tasks Chief retorted, trying to justify his action.

"You know the strength of the gas, and you also know that once a person loses consciousness the supply must be stopped and fresh air allowed in to prevent over-doping!"

"How often must I repeat that we were unable to comply with the directions for the application of the gas?" the Special Tasks boss demanded. "I intercepted her at the Research Institute, told the story about her father's accident and offered to drive her to him. She was stunned but boarded the car. I was afraid she might turn awkward if I drove in the opposite direction to her father's villa, so I propelled a good whiff of the gas into the coupé to knock her out quickly."

"That's all well and good, but as soon as she'd passed out you should have opened the rear windows," countered the Chief Organizing Officer. "It only means pulling a lever."

"I've already told you that the electric window action wasn't working," the Special Tasks boss grunted. "And I also told you I couldn't risk stopping and opening the windows manually with the streets so full of people. Stopping, leaving the car and opening rear windows would have centered attention on me and the unconscious girl and might have endangered the whole operation. It's one of those unfortunate things, but the doctor should have brought her round long ago."

"The doctor made it perfectly clear that if he tried to revive her by drastic measures these could have fatal consequences. He should know—he's familiar with the effects of this gas, after all."

"Then there's nothing we can do but wait until she wakes. She can't sleep till doomsday."

"No, but time is precious. You know we need to get the Professor and his apparatus here as quickly as possible; and to do that without fuss and bother we need the assistance of his daughter."

At this moment the communication buzzer sounded. When the

closed circuit television set was switched on, the Monitoring Officer appeared on the screen, to say:

"I've just received a message from New York, sir. It's short but satisfactory. Shall I send the tape to your office?"

"Play it back for me," the Chief Organizing Officer grunted.

A moment later the tape announced:

"Operation successful. Body claimed and arrangements for home burial made. Shall advise you after landing and European clearance."

"That's all, sir," the Monitoring Officer said.

"Thank you. Let me have the tape for filing."

"Very well, sir."

"Excellent news," the Chief of the Special Tasks Department exclaimed jubilantly. "This means 'Operation U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters' was carried out successfully and everything is set for the destruction of U.N.C.L.E."

"Yes, everything is ready for action, yet this Novak woman snores away merrily and delays our grabbing her father." The Chief Organizing Officer sighed at the dismal thought.

The Medical Officer had watched Vlasta from the moment she had been brought to THRUSH European Center E, and now he noted that the gas was beginning to lose its grip on her brain. "If these signs are not misleading, she should regain full consciousness fairly soon," he assured the Chief Organizing Officer through the telecomm.

"I'd better come round to the Medical Room to be there when she revives."

"I wouldn't advise it," the Medical Officer replied. "This gas has a peculiar effect on the brain. If anyone regaining consciousness is subjected to a shock of any sort there's a danger of complete insanity. That would knock your plans sideways."

"What do you suggest?"

"Leave her alone and let her come round gradually and undisturbed. Once she's her normal self, there's no danger of insanity and it's safe for you to see her."

"You mean you want to leave her to herself?"

"Yes, she must be left alone at first if the danger of possible shock is to be prevented."

"How will we know when she's ready for persuasion?"

"Oh, I'll be watching her continuously on the television screen in my office. Why not join me and watch her progress too?"

"I'll be with you presently," the Chief Organizing Officer replied.

Vlasta slowly came to. She felt terribly tired, her eyelids too heavy to open, with headache and dizziness upsetting her. As the effects of the gas diminished, her brain began to function normally and the tiredness and other symptoms slowly left her, until she drifted

into a light, refreshing slumber.

"It won't be long now," said the Medical Officer, watching her on the television screen. "This light sleep will only last a short while, and then when she wakes she'll be normal."

Within half an hour, Vlasta opened her eyes, yawned and stretched. She sat up, looked around, and tried to puzzle out where she was.

"I'd better go in," the Chief Organizing Officer suggested.

"Not yet; there's still the possibility of shock," the Medical Officer warned him. "I'll see her first and condition her mind to her surroundings. It won't take long before you can step in."

He slipped into a doctor's white coat and entered the adjoining Medical Room.

"Oh, good," he said as he opened the door. "I'm happy to see you well again."

"What's happened to me, doctor?" Vlasta enquired.

"Don't you know?"

"Well, I remember having been told about father's accident as I left the Research Institute, and I remember boarding a car to be taken to him. Then I felt a choking sensation and wanted to wind down the window to let in some fresh air. I couldn't open the window because my arm and hand seemed useless—and that's the last thing I know. I must have lost consciousness."

"You did, Miss Novak," the doctor confirmed. "Fortunately the driver noticed your alarming condition in the driving mirror and brought you here. You arrived in time and the stomach pump and oxygen equipment saved you."

"What was the matter?"

"Food poisoning, Miss Novak, acute food poisoning. But that's over and done with now and you're back to normal."

"Acute food poisoning?" Vlasta exclaimed, surprised. "That doesn't make sense. How could I have got food poisoning? I had breakfast and lunch at the Research Institute and it tasted all right."

"One can't always judge from the taste of food whether it's all right or not, and apart from that, some people react worse to poisoning than others." The doctor sounded plausible.

"You ought to know," she succumbed.

"Yes."

"How is my father?"

"Oh, fine, fine. He's longing to see you as soon as possible—indeed, as soon as you want him to come."

"But he had an accident. Surely it's I who should go and see him?"

"The accident was really a false alarm. There's nothing to worry about. Your father is in perfect shape, but I'm afraid we can't release

you yet because..."

"But you said earlier that the food poisoning was over and done with, and that I was back to normal," Vlasta interrupted. "If that's so there's no need for me to stay. I feel fine, really fine."

"Acute food poisoning and its aftereffects are not as simple as you think, Miss Novak. I repeat that the food poisoning is over and done with and you are back to normal, but I must add that in cases such as yours the patient must be kept under observation to detect whether there is any possibility of recurrence."

"All right then, doctor, you know best," Vlasta agreed. "When will it be possible for my father to come and see me?"

"I think you'd better discuss this with the gentleman who arranges this sort of thing—I'm only concerned with medical matters. He'll see you presently."

"Thank you, doctor."

The Medical Officer left to rejoin the Chief Organizing Officer. "She's all yours now. There's no longer any danger of shock and you can put her through the mill now, if need be."

As the Chief Organizing Officer entered, Vlasta looked up. She thought him quite good looking, though she disliked his thin lips and the close-set eyes which had a suggestion of cruelty. He noted that she was now looking very much prettier than before, when she had been under the influence of the gas.

"I am pleased to see you looking so well, Miss Novak," he said, and forced a smile.

"I feel fine," she replied, "and I think the doctor is being over-careful in keeping me here."

He ignored the remark. "I understand you're anxious to see your father," he said, sitting down on the chair beside the bed.

"I am, and I'm sure he's terribly worried about me, too."

"Well, all you need do is to write a note to him and I will arrange for him to be brought here immediately."

"I would rather phone him."

"That's not convenient," he said, dismissing her request. "You'll have to write a note."

"Can I have pen and paper?"

"Certainly." He gave the necessary orders to a messenger outside and the pen and paper was quickly brought to her.

"A short note should do," he suggested. "And you can tell your father that he can bring along his apparatus, if he wishes."

"How do you know about that?" Vlasta exclaimed, suddenly alarmed.

"My dear Miss Novak, you talked almost non-stop about your father's apparatus and your assisting him while you were

unconscious," he lied. "So you see, I am only trying to be helpful—both to your father and you—by giving you the opportunity to utilize your stay here to continue working on 'Project I.P.' With a project as important as that, there is no time to lose, for the sake of the world and humanity. It's a wonderful idea."

For some inexplicable reason Vlasta began to feel uneasy. She asked: "Which hospital am I in, actually?"

"This is not a hospital," he told her. "You're in the Medical Room of an organization."

"I want to leave at once!" she demanded, as she suddenly sensed danger.

"I'm afraid that's not possible," he said suavely.

"Are you saying I am your prisoner?"

"Let's say, a guest—as long as you don't behave foolishly."

There was now an expression in his eyes she didn't like, yet she was not afraid, and was determined to withstand any pressure on her.

"I'd advise you to write the note, Miss Novak," he pressed. "It would make matters very much easier all round."

"I am not going to write anything. I am not going to help you get my father here!" She was adamant, despite his threatening tone.

"You have five minutes to change your mind. If you..."

"I am not going to change my mind in five minutes or five thousand hours," Vlasta interrupted.

He stabbed a button on the wall beside her and seconds later two guards and some THRUSH officers filed into the room. Vlasta was securely strapped to the bed and electronic equipment was attached to her limbs.

The brainwashing and conditioning of her mind lasted a considerable time. When it was done, she wrote the note to her father.

His daughter's disappearance had brought Professor Novak to the verge of a nervous breakdown. He had visibly aged, and felt physically ill. He couldn't sleep, didn't touch food or drink—only chain-smoked. He was almost continuously in touch with State Security Headquarters, but the people there could only repeatedly tell him that the nationwide search for his daughter had not been slackened for an instant. As the hours dragged on without the slightest clue being found, he lived in fear that he would never see Vlasta again.

The stillness of his villa was suddenly disturbed by the sound of the doorbell, but he was not interested in learning who his visitor was, being in no mood for seeing anyone. All he wanted was news that his daughter had been found alive, and that, he knew, could only come by telephone from State Security Headquarters.

The caller continued to ring the doorbell.

Grudgingly the scientist pulled himself from his arm chair in the living room and walked heavily to the entrance door. When he opened it, a stranger, a well-dressed man of about forty, raised his bat and said:

"Professor Novak?"

"Yes."

"May I come in, please?"

"What is it about?"

"It's a private matter which I can't very well convey on the doorstep," the stranger said. "I won't keep you long, Professor."

"Step inside then."

As soon as the door was shut, the stranger removed Vlasta's note from the breast pocket of his coat and said: "Your daughter asked me to deliver this to you."

"My daughter?" the Professor answered in a trembling voice. "Is she all right?"

"Yes. Why don't you read her letter?"

The Professor tore open the envelope, read the note, re-read it, and each time stumbled over the sentence, "I'm longing to see you, papa—and the apparatus—I think I have found the solution."

"How can I be certain this is my daughter's handwriting?" he said after a long pause.

"You surely know your daughter's handwriting," the stranger returned.

"I do; but it is also known that good forgeries can be made."

"I can assure you, sir, that it is your daughter's handwriting," the other assured him. "You'll see for yourself that she's written the letter to you when you meet her."

"Why didn't she phone me?"

"Because there's no telephone yet installed where she is. You know how difficult it is to get a phone these days—the majority of applicants wait years..."

"Where is she?"

"With friends. I have a car here to take you to her."

"Very well then," the Professor agreed, and took coat and hat from the clothes rack in the entrance hall. "I'm ready. Let's go."

"The apparatus, sir," the stranger reminded him. "You've forgotten it."

"How stupid of me to forget!" the scientist retorted. "If you care to come along with me, we'll fetch it from my laboratory."

When they reached the heavy steel door to the laboratory, Professor Novak placed himself close to it in order to prevent the stranger observing the combination of the lock. His hands were trembling and it took longer than usual to open the door. As they

stepped into the laboratory, he wiped thick beads of sweat from his forehead and said in a weak voice:

"Excuse me if I sit down a while, I'm suddenly dizzy. Probably the excitement..."

"Don't worry, sir," said the stranger understandingly. "Take your time. Would you like a cigarette?"

"No, thank you. I'll be all right in a minute or two..."

The minute or two stretched to almost ten minutes. Suddenly the stillness of the laboratory was disturbed by hard boots running inside the villa and shouted commands. Uniformed State Security men, pistols drawn, rushed into the laboratory and handcuffed the stranger before he could protest. When he had been led away, the officer in charge said;

"What happened, Professor?"

The scientist relayed the details of the incident, handed the officer his daughter's letter and added:

"The handwriting is my daughter's, I am certain, but it's not her style of writing. She never calls me 'papa', and why would she ask me to come and see her with the apparatus? I thought it best to call you.

The easiest way of doing it was not to disconnect the alarm system before setting the combination of the lock and then to wait for you."

"You did well, Professor," the officer praised him, "and it might give us a lead as to your daughter. It's clear that she was kidnapped, to be used as a hostage to force you to hand over your apparatus."

"I only hope that my summoning you doesn't induce her kidnappers to kill her in revenge..."

"You needn't worry about that, Professor," the officer reassured him. "As long as the kidnappers keep her alive they can hope to get at you through her. Besides, they have no clue that you called us. They'll assume that our guards, who keep the villa under observation, became suspicious and raised the alarm."

"I hope you are right."

"I'm sure I am. And if there's another approach, which I expect there will be, play along with them, Professor. Why not let them have a replica of your apparatus without the vital components in it?"

"A good idea, officer. When they find the thing doesn't work I can always convince them that I am still far from the final working solution—which in fact I am."

But unknown to them, the Chief Organizing Officer at THRUSH European Center E knew exactly what had happened at Professor Novak's villa even before his control agent, who had shadowed his colleague, reported the event. The Monitoring Officer had bugged and taped every single sound and word that had been spoken.

"What are we going to do now?" the Head of the Technical Department enquired.

"The only solution is to use force," the Chief of the Special Tasks Department decided, after pondering the problem.

"And risk the apparatus being destroyed before we can lay our hands on it?" the Head of the Science Department objected.

"My plan is foolproof," the other assured him, "and I wish I'd thought of it earlier—we would have had the Professor and his precious apparatus here by now. The plan entails possibly killing some State Security people, but that doesn't worry me unduly and I don't think it worries any of you."

"Perhaps you'll put us in the picture," the Head of the Technical Department suggested.

"I'll send a detachment in uniforms and vehicles of the State Security, to the Professor's villa. The real State Security guards keeping the villa under round-the-clock surveillance must of course be silenced, but this is a small detail. When our 'State Security' officers arrive there, the officer in charge will tell the Professor that State Security Headquarters were worried about the earlier occurrence and decided to move him and his apparatus to a safer place.

That's all, gentlemen, and I don't doubt that the plan will work. Professor Novak and his apparatus should be here inside two hours."

His estimate was right, almost to the minute, for the plan worked. Professor Novak was not surprised at the decision of State Security Headquarters to move him and the apparatus from the villa; in fact, he was in favor of it. Yet once in the fake State Security car, he at once realized he had been tricked—too late to escape his kidnappers.

CHAPTER FIVE

KISSING CAN CAUSE UNCONSCIOUSNESS

NAPOLEON SOLO gazed out of the window as the giant jet prepared to land at Prague. He had studied the layout of the Czech capital during his flight from New York, yet still he did not expect the city to look as picturesque and romantic as it did in the glorious bright sunshine, with its silvery, winding river Moldau, its numerous bridges, multi-colored roofs and gables, countless churches, and the imposing castle Hradcany overlooking the whole panorama. He was not usually an admirer of ancient or modern cities, but the unexpected view of Prague evoked a feeling of contentedness in him.

"Will you please fasten your safety belt, sir," a pretty stewardess interrupted his thoughts.

"Certainly, Miss," he said with a bright smile, looking provocatively into the greenish eyes of the redhead. He hadn't seen her before during the flight—she was probably busy in the tourist class, he thought—and decided on the spur of the moment to try and date her. "How long are you staying in Prague?" he asked.

"We're returning in an hour's time."

"My luck," he mumbled.

"Pardon?"

"I meant, what a pity you aren't staying longer," he explained. "I'd hoped to have dinner with you to night."

"Another time perhaps," she said, and moved on towards the pilot's cabin.

The aircraft circled over the sunbathed city, reducing speed and height until it eventually flew only a short distance above some houses that stood in the immediate vicinity of the airport. Then the wheels of the giant jet touched down and the pilot headed the machine towards the white terminal building with the outsize letters, KBELY AIRPORT, on its walls.

There were not too many passengers bound for Prague, and passport and customs clearance was fairly speedy.

As Solo left the Customs Hall and strode into the reception area, he noticed a short, thick-set man who was somehow familiar to him and who hastily left the airport building as soon as he'd spotted him. For a moment he couldn't place the man, then he remembered that he had come across him some six months earlier in Cairo, where the man, a THRUSH agent, had escaped arrest.

"Well, it's not really my business to chase this villain," he thought as he went towards the taxi in front of the rank. "Take me to Dejvice,

please," he asked the driver as he boarded the cab. "And I should be obliged if you would put your foot down—I'm in a hurry."

The driver grinned and raced along the semi-deserted road towards Prague.

As Napoleon leaned against the seat of the cab, trying to make himself as comfortable as possible, he gazed out at the factories and dwelling houses on each side of the road, his thoughts returning to the THRUSH agent who had managed to disappear so effectively. He could not know that the man had already privately radioed THRUSH European Center E of Solo's arrival in Prague.

Napoleon ordered the driver to stop a couple of streets away from Professor Novak's villa. He intended to arrive at the scientist's residence discreetly.

After paying the man, he walked along the deserted streets.

The Professor's villa on the opposite side of the tree-lined street came into view and Napoleon slowed to have a good look at it. He was surprised at the lack of State Security guards around the building and surrounding area and assumed they were probably hidden in neighboring properties to create the impression that the house was not under surveillance.

He crossed the quiet, completely deserted street, went straight to the entrance door, and pushed his thumb on the bell button. He heard the shrill sound echo inside the villa.

There was no response to the ringing.

He pressed again and kept on doing so for some time. There was still no answer. He decided to investigate whether the villa was empty or whether the Professor had, perhaps, been taken ill and was unable to answer the call. He moved around the building, peering into the windows of the various rooms and testing the locked doors.

He was looking through a window when he felt the muzzle of a gun in his back. His arms were seized from behind, and then he was handcuffed. All this had been done without a word being spoken by his captors, and it had all been very swift and efficient.

A young man in the uniform of Czech State Security seized his arm and led him round the building towards the exit, still without a word spoken.

"What's the matter? Is everybody dumb?" Napoleon burst out.

But there was no reaction to his questions. Outside the villa, in front of the entrance, stood a State Security van with a uniformed driver at the wheel. Napoleon was pushed in and driven off at considerable speed. Four fierce-looking men with pistols at the ready guarded him. Throughout the journey nothing was said.

The fifteen minutes or so ride in the stuffy van ended at Czech State Security Headquarters where U.N.C.L.E.'S Chief Enforcement

Agent was led to an interrogation room.

"What's the reason for your queer hospitality?" Solo barked. He now faced a middle-aged man in the uniform of a Czech State Security Major. "Are you dumb too?"

"Why do you speak with an American accent?" the Major asked in broken English.

"Because I am American."

"American, eh?" the Major mocked. "That's a new one on me."

"If you care to slip your hand into the right-hand pocket inside my jacket you'll find my identification card..."

The officer did as requested and extracted Solo's U.N.C.L.E. credentials. "Why didn't you identify yourself as an U.N.C.L.E. Enforcement Officer? You wouldn't have been arrested and brought here," he said at last. He introduced himself as Major Klima.

"I didn't get the chance," Napoleon explained. "Your men grabbed me and pretended to be dumb. I didn't have any other choice than to come along quietly."

"I am sorry," the Major apologized. "You see, they suspected you were one of the gang who snatched Professor Novak and his apparatus, and thought you'd returned to the scene of the crime for some reason, so they brought you here straight away without even searching you."

"Professor Novak was kidnapped?" Napoleon exclaimed. "Any clue to where he might have been taken?"

"Plenty of clues, but if you mean whether he's been found yet, the answer is 'No'," returned Major Klima. "We are treating the matter as a national emergency and every resource, informers and the public, have been mobilized and are engaged in the countrywide manhunt for the Professor and his daughter. At the moment, neither of them has been found. However, rapid developments are imminent."

"I am sure you are right." Napoleon asked for more details of the kidnapping.

"After Vlasta Novak's disappearance we strengthened our security measures at her father's villa," Major Klima went on. "We managed to locate an observant woman who'd witnessed Vlasta Novak being approached by a man who looked like an official driver, and who told her about her father having been involved in a road accident. This witness also described the car, which looked like an official one, and gave us its registration number. The number plate was, of course, a fake."

"Naturally," Napoleon said.

"Having this information, it was clear that Miss Novak had been kidnapped to enable some unknown elements to use her to get to her father and his hush-hush apparatus," Major Klima continued. He told

Solo about the concentrated countrywide hunt for the girl; about the stranger's call at Professor Novak's villa, the letter, and the arrest of the stranger; and then added: "We'd hoped to get some clue from the arrested man as to Miss Novak's whereabouts and the gang who'd kidnapped her, but our expectations were shattered. During the short transport from Dejvice to Headquarters here, the man died. No one knows how, but he must have managed to swallow some fast-acting poison."

"Where's the body?" Napoleon asked.

"Why?" Major Klima asked, surprised. "If you think we haven't examined every millimetre of his body and clothing you can forget it. The most extensive forensic examinations yielded no useful result. The body is now in the mortuary. A post-mortem is to be carried out tomorrow morning by our leading pathologist to detect the poison, and the body will then be cremated."

"It never crossed my mind that the body wasn't examined thoroughly for clues," Napoleon assured him, and went on to tell the Czech about the incident at U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters. "I've just been thinking whether this might be an identical case and whether someone might attempt to recover the body for subsequent revival."

"No one made any move to claim the body," Major Klima said. "The public mortuary would have notified us at once. But to set your mind at rest I'll check with them straight away." He did this, and a short while later Napoleon heard him shout into the telephone receiver: "How is that possible? I thought you had everything under proper control!" He banged the receiver down onto its rest and said to Solo: "The body has disappeared! I'll instigate a full-scale enquiry and the mortuary staff will have to account for their negligence."

There was no point in staying at Czech State Security Headquarters any longer. Napoleon took his leave from the cooperative Major Klima, who welcomed his suggestion that they should keep in close contact, promising to afford U.N.C.L.E.'S Chief Enforcement Agent every assistance he required.

It was already twilight when Napoleon left the State Security building, and the street lights transformed the Old Town of the ancient city of Prague into a reminder of medieval times. As he walked along the narrow, winding streets and crossed the picturesque squares, he looked at the age-old buildings and frequently stopped to admire the unusual stuccos on some of the architectural relics of by-gone times. He loved the atmosphere that seemed to hang in the air and made frequent detours to explore more of the city. He stopped at every statue on the long and narrow Charles Bridge, admiring the beauty of the ancient creations, and then went to Kampa Island, looking fascinated at the river Moldau and the panorama of Hradcany

castle—the ancient seat of Czech kings—with the St. Vitus Cathedral looking down on the city.

Passing eventually the blackish-grey Powder Tower with its square green copper roofing, and crossing into Poric Street, he found himself in twentieth-century Prague, with its noisy trams rattling along the rails in the middle of the road and cars and lorries rushing along, hooting frequently, the drivers swearing at each other now and again as drivers do the world over. He was struck by the contrast between the old and the new, but thought there was plenty of room for improvement in the Czech capital—by doing away with the outdated tramcars and by improving the traffic problem.

He reached the Axa Hotel without incident and was allocated the room that had been reserved for him. The bellboy led him to the elevator and took him to his room on the second floor at the end of the corridor.

"Is there anything else you'd like me to do, sir?" the bellboy said, clearly waiting to be tipped.

"Can I get a meal here?" Napoleon enquired.

"Certainly, sir. The restaurant is downstairs. Would you like me to reserve a table for you with a view of the swimming pool?"

"You have a swimming pool?"

"Oh yes, sir, it's very popular."

Napoleon pressed a generous tip into the bellboy's willing hand and said: "Reserve a table for me near the pool. I'll be down soon."

He turned the key in the lock after he'd closed the door behind the boy and studied the room. It was the usual modern hotel job, clean, square, with the customary furniture. The two windows looked out on Poric Street, with its dense stream of pedestrians and traffic, and the frosted glass window in the adjoining bathroom overlooked a small yard. His eyes searched everywhere for concealed bugging devices, until he discovered one behind the bathroom mirror, one at the back of the bed headboard, and another inside the telephone on the bedside table. He identified them as highly sensitive electronic microphones which could transmit every sound from inside the room to a receiver some distance away. But he knew how to render them useless when he did not want to be overheard.

As he left the room and locked the door from the outside, a missile whistled past his head, almost touching his hair. He had not heard the report of a shot but realized that someone had fired at him. Although he saw no one, he ran towards the other end of the deserted corridor, for this was where the missile must have been fired. His gun was ready for action. Before he reached the part where the elevator was set back into the wall of the passage, he heard the sliding metal doors bang shut and the elevator descending. He looked for a staircase

to run down and catch his attacker, but being unfamiliar with the hotel layout, by the time he found the stairs pursuit was useless.

For some inexplicable reason, he connected the attack with the man he had seen on his arrival at the airport reception area; he was certain it was THRUSH, out to silence him.

He returned to the elevator and descended to the restaurant for his meal. He strolled slowly across the hotel lounge, watching for anyone who might be a fresh danger to him, but the few people around him seemed to be ordinary men and women.

"Mr. Solo?" the headwaiter asked as Napoleon entered the restaurant. "Your table is ready." He called out "Piccolo!" and when a boy waiter hastened along, he told him: "Take Mr. Solo to table fourteen."

The restaurant was full and Napoleon did not bother to try and pick out any other possible suspects, knowing this was a near impossible task. He followed the boy waiter to the table reserved for him near the swimming pool below and was pleased that he could watch the swimmers—particularly the female ones—while eating his food. It gave him such an appetite.

The headwaiter brought the menu and said:

"The Chateau Briand is exceptionally good today, and I can also highly recommend the Mixed Grill which is primaprimissimo. But perhaps you'd prefer a typical Czech dish? I can recommend our roast pork with dumplings and Sauerkraut—sweet and sour cabbage. It's delicious. We are famous for it."

"I think I'll have the Chateau Briand."

"Would you like it well done?"

"No, medium."

"May I recommend potato croquettes, French peas, mushrooms and onions perhaps?" The head waiter busied himself in the typical Central European manner. "I can assure you, it's superbly prepared."

"O.K.," Napoleon said, watching a slim blonde who was sitting on the edge of the swimming pool and putting a gay rubber cap on her head.

"May I suggest smoked trout for hors-d'oeuvre?" the headwaiter continued.

"Yes, that sounds fine," Napoleon said absently, watching the blonde stand up and dive into the water.

"We'll leave the question of the dessert till later, shall we, Mr. Solo?" the headwaiter suggested, and, without waiting for a reply, went on: "I'll send the wine waiter along."

Napoleon was fully occupied watching the blonde swimming gracefully and thinking that he wouldn't mind swimming along with her, when the headwaiter returned and interrupted his thoughts.

"What is it now?" he demanded, a little annoyed.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Solo, but a sort of crisis has occurred..."

"If the Chateau Briand is off, make it the Mixed Grill," Napoleon said, and turned back towards the swimming pool.

"It's not that, Mr. Solo. The Chateau Briand is being cooked for you and the smoked trout will be served presently. It's... well... we have no table available and a young lady would like to have dinner at our restaurant. I came to ask you if you would agree to share your table with her." And, in an attempt to prevent Napoleon refusing his request, he added:

"She is piquant, Mr. Solo, a picture of a woman. I am sure you would enjoy her company."

"I shall be delighted to help you," Napoleon said, and smiled.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Solo. I am sure you won't regret it."

A few moments later Napoleon saw a waiter lead a young woman towards his table. She was tall, with a shapely figure, her elegant fawn dress making a startling contrast to her dark-brown hair and her pale face with its striking, almost beautiful, features. Napoleon stood up and bowed as his table companion sat down on the chair opposite him. He wanted to say something but decided it was too early to do so.

"It was very kind of you to agree sharing your table with me," the woman said, smiling her acknowledgment.

"It's a great pleasure, Madam," he smiled back.

"You are American?" Her intonation sounded as though she was surprised.

"I am," he said. "I hope my nationality doesn't turn me into a monster."

"I like Americans," she smiled, and looked into his eyes. "I think you are wonderful people."

The headwaiter's unwelcome appearance prevented Napoleon from paying a return compliment, and he had no choice other than to let the long-winded man, who turned the choice of food into an elaborate affair, go on with his business.

While his table companion talked with the head waiter and expertly selected her meal, Napoleon watched the vivid expressions as they played on her face. He admitted that he had rarely come across a female with such exquisite charm and was happy at the chance that had brought them together.

The evening was a success. They talked, drank and danced.

"It's getting late," she said, as they finished the last dance and the musicians started to pack away their instruments.

"The night is young," Napoleon insisted.

"But we haven't any nightclubs in Prague such as you have in the States," she said. "Everything is closing now."

"We could round off the evening with a drink or two in my room," he suggested.

"Let's go," she said softly; "even without drinks. I think you're intoxicating enough without alcoholic stimulants."

Napoleon settled the bill and tipped the headwaiter handsomely.

As they walked through the hotel lounge towards the elevator, Napoleon sensed that someone was watching them, but even though he turned round sharply, he saw no suspect. "Must be imagining things," he thought, and walked on.

When they entered his room and he had shut the door, she put her arms around his neck impulsively and kissed him.

"Now that's what I call a really friendly gesture," he said, "and one good turn deserves another." So he kissed her back.

As they embraced she felt the gun secured in the holster fastened under his left arm. "You carry a gun?" she exclaimed.

"It's an old American custom," he explained casually.

She held him tight with her left arm around his neck. Then, deftly and gently, she slid the automatic from the holster and hit him on the head with the butt of the gun. "I'm sorry I had to do this," she said as she landed him another blow to make certain he was out.

She patted her ruffled hair, removed the compact from her handbag, opened it and said softly:

"Assignment completed. He's in his room ready for collection."

She looked at the unconscious Napoleon, his gun now beside his head on the pillow, and said: "I bet you didn't guess that my compact conceals an ultra-shortwave radio transmitter, my U.N.C.L.E. lover. It was nice knowing you."

She turned the key in the lock from the outside as she left the room and placed it on top of the door frame. She then left the hotel.

Her message was received by the Monitoring Officer at THRUSH European Center E, and was immediately passed to the Chief of the Special Tasks Department.

"I want you to collect Solo from his room and bring him here in one piece," he instructed two of his senior officers. "I repeat, no other action under any circumstances—he is to be made use of. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," the two men acknowledged.

"To avoid creating any attention I suggest you lower him down into the yard from the bathroom window. That's safe and easy."

"Yes, sir."

As Napoleon Solo slowly recovered, he felt a sharp pain at the back of his head and he automatically raised his hand to touch the

sore spot.

He lay on the bed trying to figure out what had happened. The fragrant scent of the girl's perfume tickled his nostrils. Suddenly memories flowed back and he sat up abruptly, searching the room to discover whether his beautiful companion had also been coshed. When he found he was alone, the penny dropped and he murmured angrily: "Cunning slut! I should have known better!" Her "accidental" appearance in the restaurant had been a plant. Napoleon was furious with himself for falling for the trick.

He stood up and stretched his arms and found he had not suffered any damage other than the bump at the back of his head.

As he went to the bathroom to pour cold water over his aching head, he figured out that the treacherous female could only be the prelude to something else. And, on discovering that the key of the door to his room had gone and that he was locked in, he was certain he was right.

He re-fixed the gun under his arm and slipped on his jacket, prepared for action as and when it arose. He sat on the bed, wondering whether he should notify Major Klima at Czech State Security Headquarters about his predicament and enlist his help, but dismissed this thought.

"If knocking me unconscious was only a beginning," he thought "some thugs will come soon to drag me to THRUSH Headquarters. When they do, they're bound to rush to the bed, because they must have been told where to find me and they'll expect me to be still flat on my back, not reckoning on my thick head helping me recover so quickly."

Hurriedly he took some cushions from the armchairs and pushed them under the bedspread to form the outline of a body. Then he shaped a towel to resemble a head. Under the bedspread his creation looked as if someone was lying there covered up. When he switched off the bedside lamp and studied the bed again, he was pleased with his efforts. The street lamp below only let a tiny speck of light into the room and anyone entering it and rushing to the bed was certain to be deceived.

As he stood there like a Frankenstein admiring his monster, his sharp ears heard a key being quietly inserted into the door lock. He stepped behind the door to be concealed when it was opened.

Two sturdy thugs entered the room and crossed to the bed. When Napoleon was certain no others were with them, he leaped forward like a wildcat and slugged one of the intruders with a short sharp blow on the neck. He then dealt with his surprised companion almost as swiftly. They had not even had the chance to discover they had been about to snatch a dummy under the bedspread.

He locked the room from the inside to safeguard himself against other possible intruders, tied his prisoners by their hands and feet, then lifted the telephone receiver and connected with Major Klima.

"Expect me within ten minutes," the Major said when Napoleon reported the intruders.

Major Klima and several uniformed State Security officers arrived before the thugs regained consciousness. Solo had hit them good and hard because they did not recover even when cold water was poured over their heads, and eventually had to be carried away like a couple of sacks of potatoes.

"Where is the woman who was with you?" Major Klima asked when he was alone with Solo.

"Why do you think there was a woman here?" Napoleon said, trying to evade the question.

"Your room smells like a perfume shop and there's lipstick on your pillow," the Czech said. "There are also lipstick traces on your shirt collar, Mr. Solo, and they look to me very much the same color as the ones on your pillow." He spotted the look on Napoleon's face, and added: "We all make mistakes."

"It's not that, Major; it's that I behaved like a stupid clown chasing a pretty skirt." He felt very small.

"These things happen. Tell me the whole story. It might help us both."

Like a schoolboy caught by his headmaster, Napoleon told Major Klima of the encounter with the woman in the restaurant.

"I wouldn't let it worry you, Mr. Solo. And with such a valuable description of the lady, I think I know her identity; but I'll send our fingerprint people along to confirm or discount my suspicion."

"I am glad my encounter has had some purpose other than teaching me a lesson," Napoleon said.

A quarter-of-an-hour later Napoleon watched the two fingerprint men working their way systematically around the room.

"I suggest you contact me in the morning," Major Klima said at last. "By then I hope to tell you whether or not we have established the identity of the lady and then we can discuss the next steps to take."

Napoleon felt suddenly tired. He'd had enough for one night. He was even too tired to undress. He flopped onto the bed and was out to the world, to U.N.C.L.E., and to anyone else, within seconds.

CHAPTER SIX

CALLING ALL COFFINS

AFTER Illya Kuryakin had transmitted his radio report to Alexander Waverly, he returned to the building in which the City Funeral Directors conducted their business to check on any further development. The offices were closed, but, tuning in to the direction finder in the "dead" man's tooth, he had no difficulty in locating the right coffin in the dark funeral parlor. He had been able to get inside through an open window in the back.

Illya knew that the ingeniously concealed direction finder had only a limited detection radius and, anticipating that Vienna was not the ultimate destination but that the body was likely to be transported further, he wanted to be sure of all the arrangements. He took a miniature bug from his pocket and secured it safely under the hollow handle of the coffin. Satisfied that he would now be able to listen from a considerable distance to any word spoken near the coffin, he left the funeral parlor through the window.

As he reached the street through the backyard, he observed a car drawing up at the entrance of the premises of City Funeral Directors. He stepped back to avoid being seen. The man who had claimed the body earlier stepped out of the car with two companions. As they entered the building, Illya returned to the backyard to pick up with his receiver the conversation in the funeral parlor. As he stepped into the backyard, the lights in the building came on.

"You left the window open," he heard a man say, and was almost certain it belonged to the one who had pretended to be the dead man's relative.

"We always do, especially if we have bodies here," another voice explained.

"I see," the first voice said. "Now, I think we'd better get all those forms signed so that the formalities are done with and the body can be flown out tomorrow morning on the eight o'clock plane without last minute snags."

"We've already obtained the necessary papers and as soon as these forms are signed and duly witnessed everything is clear," the other voice said. Illya heard the rustling of papers in his earphone and then a voice said: "If you sign here, and I add my signature below yours, my colleague can witness the signatures."

When the formalities were completed, Illya heard the first voice announce: "That's it, then. You'll see to it that the body is at the airport in good time tomorrow morning?"

"Everything is arranged. The coffin will be at the checkin desk before seven o'clock in the proper regulation package. You can rely on our efficiency."

"Thank you very much," the first voice said, and added: "Should you need me between now and the morning, you'll find me at home—apartment one-four-eight, one-o-o-two Fourth Avenue, telephone number..."

"I have all that," the second voice cut in; "but I won't need to worry you anymore—everything is in order."

Illya heard the man leave and the sounds of the two others preparing the coffin for transportation. He switched off his receiver and removed the earphone.

It was long after midnight when he turned into Fourth Avenue to have a look at the THRUSH agent's address. The building was deserted and he found it easy to slip in unnoticed and to take the service elevator to the first floor to apartment 148.

The corridor was empty and Illya was able to take a good look round. Apartment 148 was the one but last, and he stood outside the entrance door for a moment to attach a highly sensitive limpet microphone which enabled him to hear every sound inside. The only thing he could hear in the apartment was the fairly loud ticking of a clock and a man breathing heavily, as if asleep.

He waited a while, considering whether he should let himself in through the door or head for the fire escape, balance along the parapet, and climb in through the window. He wanted to fix another bug to the man's clothing to ensure his being able to overhear every word the THRUSH agent spoke.

On impulse he extracted the necessary tool from his pocket, opened the door silently and entered the small entrance hail, without making the slightest sound. He paused a moment, to accustom his eyes to the darkness. The only sounds were of the deep breathing of the man in the room on the right and the loud ticking of the clock.

The door to the room was open. Illya entered noiselessly. He looked at the man who was sleeping soundly and discovered that the loud ticking came from an alarm clock on the bedside table, set for 5.30 a.m.

Illya discovered to his great delight that the man wore a heavy leather belt, ideally suited for safely securing the miniature bugging device. He knelt down next to the chair on which the belted trousers lay and expertly fixed the tiny electronic ear in the loop that held the buckle.

This operation completed, Illya moved to the window in the adjoining room and climbed on to the parapet. On reaching the fire escape he stopped to check the bugging device in the man's belt. It

worked superbly and he could still hear the ticking of the alarm clock and the deep breathing.

He left the building.

He arrived in good time at the airport and found a spot from where he could observe the coffin being cleared by the officials and taken to the runway to be loaded in the hold of the giant jet airliner with other luggage and freight. When departure time came, he joined the stream of travelers boarding the aircraft. He noted that the THRUSH agent was now accompanied by another man.

Without anyone taking any undue notice of him, Illya went up the steps to the plane and made himself comfortable by a window seat at the tail end. Unobtrusively he placed the little plug in his ear to listen to what the two THRUSH agents in the front part of the airliner were saying. At first they said nothing but, after the plane was airborne and out over the Atlantic, they ordered some whisky and subsequently said they would utilize the flight for getting some sleep.

This suited Illya admirably. He, too, was tired and could do with some rest, especially as he expected to get little chance of any after the aircraft landed at its destination.

By the time the jet touched down at Vienna, Illya felt refreshed and ready to cope with anything. Passport and customs clearance were a mere formality. He ascertained that the coffin had been taken to the airport warehouse and, immediately afterwards, saw the man in charge of the THRUSH operation disappear into the washroom.

Illya was almost certain that this meant the THRUSH agent was going to communicate with his center, so, pretending to make a telephone call, he fastened the listening device in his ear and was in time he hear the man transmit:

"We are at Vienna Airport and awaiting further instructions."

"I'll have a helicopter ready for you in two hours' time for taking you both with your cargo to Vysehrad," Illya heard another voice say. "Proceed immediately to the landing strip near St. Pölten and be prepared for immediate takeoff. On arrival beneath Vysehrad on the bank of the Moldau, board the boat with the yellow light above its starboard navigation light. From Vysehrad you'll be brought here."

"Message received and understood, sir," the other voice said, and Illya heard the soft click of the ultra-shortwave radio transmitter-receiver being switched off.

The man reappeared in the airport lounge, and with his accomplice, went to the warehouse. A few moments later, the coffin was loaded into a van. The two men boarded the driver's cabin and the vehicle drove off at high speed.

Illya found a quiet corner in the airport building to send a message to Waverley, informing him that he was taking a plane to

Prague to be on the scene ready for action.

"Contact Mr. Solo on arrival," Waverly instructed.

"He's pursuing a lead and your hitherto separate assignments are merging."

"Yes, sir," said Illya and closed Channel D.

While the charter aircraft, with Illya as its sole passenger, took off for Prague, the Chief Organizing Officer at THRUSH European Center E was taking off in another way—he was losing his temper; for Professor Novak was stubbornly refusing to cooperate. What made matters worse was that no THRUSH scientists or technicians could figure out how the simple-looking apparatus worked and how it could be used for THRUSH'S own purposes.

"I am unable to tolerate your stubbornness any longer, Professor," the Chief Organizing Officer bellowed at the tired scientist who faced him with defiance. "I have allowed you to meet your daughter to ascertain that she is well and happy, and I have made it clear to you that high reward and esteem will be yours if you cooperate with us; but you don't seem to appreciate this, otherwise you wouldn't behave like an obstinate mule."

He paused and looked at the Professor, trying to detect whether his words had made any impact on the elderly man. When he saw that the scientist remained unperturbed he yelled:

"I warn you, Professor Novak! If you force me to use different persuasion, I will!"

"You can do what you wish," the Professor said, unmoved. "I have lived my life and I don't care..."

The THRUSH Officer interrupted: "You don't care what happens to your daughter, Professor Novak?"

At this, the scientist's face showed his hatred, but the THRUSH chief knew it was, above all, motivated by fear for his daughter's safety.

"You don't seem to appreciate that your daughter wants you to work with us," he continued. "Indeed she is eager to join you in your research. She told you so herself."

"Because you brainwashed or hypnotized her. I know Vlasta." He sat back in the chair, then suddenly said: "Can I speak with my daughter once more—in private?"

"Certainly," the other agreed, and summoned a guard from outside the office. "Take the Professor to his daughter," he ordered, "and make sure they can talk in complete privacy and undisturbed."

"Very well, sir," the guard acknowledged as he led the scientist away.

The Chief Organizing Officer activated the closed circuit television receiver to watch Vlasta's room and to listen to what father

and daughter said to each other.

"Did you agree to work for them, father?" the girl said after the Professor had entered the room and the door had been closed.

"I wanted to talk with you first once more."

"There is no purpose in refusing, father," she insisted.

"I am shocked to hear you speak like that, Vlasta."

"Why?"

"Because we're talking with each other in private now. There's no longer any need to continue your acting, which was very convincing when we talked to each other in the presence of that man."

"I mean what I say, father. There is no purpose in refusing to work for them. They are determined to get their way and if you don't follow their orders they'll kill both of us."

"You really believe they would kill you?"

"I do. And I also believe that the only way to stay alive and to be set free again is by our cooperating with them and providing them with the improved apparatus."

"Don't you realize that we would betray our country if we worked for them?"

"I don't want to be tortured to death, father, and I don't want it to happen to you either."

"So you want me to capitulate, Vlasta?" the Professor said, at last broken in spirit.

"Yes, I do. I know it's hard for you to throw overboard your convictions and your loyalty to our Government, but it's the only solution. It will give us the opportunity to be with one another continuously and work together in perfecting the apparatus."

"All right, Vlasta," he sighed. "I know I'll be committing a terrible crime against our nation by agreeing to work for these people, but I'll nevertheless do it—for you, my child."

Vlasta felt miserable as her father left to report his decision. She had been tempted to signal her father that she was playing a part because she was certain their conversation was being overheard, but she feared that even a warning signal from her would be dangerous. Since her father and the apparatus had arrived at the Center she had evolved in her mind how their captors could be outwitted by using the thought-transference apparatus against them. But, to be able to turn her counterattack idea into reality, she and her father needed to worm their way into the enemy's nerve center and gain their confidence. When they were eventually in control of the apparatus, they could hit back. But how could she tell this to her father, with no secure possibility of discussing it with him in genuine privacy?

Unaware of Vlasta's intentions, the Chief Organizing Officer was pleased with her behavior and switched off the closed circuit

television in his office as soon as the Professor left her room. When the scientist entered the office moments later, he said: "Well?"

"I have talked over matters with my daughter and have decided to accept your invitation to work with you," Professor Novak announced wearily. "Together with my daughter, I will carry out the research on my apparatus to the best of my ability and endeavor to make as rapid headway as possible. But now I am worn out and need rest."

"I am pleased with your wise decision and am convinced a beneficial association has just commenced between us," the THRUSH executive assured him. "I shall make it my personal business to see that your stay with us doesn't lack any comfort."

"Thank you," Professor Novak said, and followed a guard to a luxuriously furnished bed-sitting room. He was happy when he discovered that his daughter was allocated an adjoining and almost identical room.

But this evening he did not feel like visiting and talking with her, as had been his habit at the villa. All he wanted to do was to sleep...

And, as he slept, the jet bringing Illya Kuryakin to Prague landed at Kbely Airport.

The plane had been expected, and with minimum delay U.N.C.L.E.'S Enforcement Agent was able to step into a waiting car and drive to a point on the bank of the river Moldau, opposite Vysehrad. Illya studied the deserted area through his night field glasses.

The helicopter, with the coffin and the two THRUSH agents, was not due in Prague for another half-an-hour.

The distant sound of a boat engine somewhere on the river broke the silence. The heavy rain clouds hanging low in the sky shut out all moonlight and in the almost total darkness the approaching boat could not be seen until it was almost on top of him. The craft's skipper suddenly switched on the navigation lights before turning around in mid-river and anchoring on the opposite bank. As the boat passed, Illya could see a dim yellow light above the starboard navigation light.

Soon afterwards, the noise of an approaching helicopter disturbed the night. Through the field glasses he watched the helicopter land and a few minutes later the coffin was lifted out and taken to the waiting boat, which then moved off towards the city of Prague. The helicopter took off and headed back in the direction from which it had come.

Illya returned to his car and drove along the road by the riverbank towards Prague. The sound of the direction finder concealed in the man's tooth in the coffin was clearly picked up by his receiver, but when the road took a sharp turn to the left and ran a quarter of a

mile or so inland, he lost contact. Huge blocks of buildings stood between the river and the road and before Illya had managed to make his way back to the Moldau, the boat had gone and the direction finder was beyond range.

Annoyed, he returned to the car and drove into the city. He doubted whether the boat could have proceeded too deep into the built-up area because the THRUSH European Center E was unlikely to be located anywhere where there was the slightest chance of detection. He made up his mind to return to the area outside Prague, where he had lost contact with the direction finder, as soon as he'd met Solo. They would have to cover the whole zone on both banks of the river before they could again find the radio transmitting coffin.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MURDER IS SUCH A MESSY BUSINESS

MAJOR KLIMA looked up gloomily as Napoleon Solo entered his office at Czech State Security Head quarters the morning after the incident at the Axa Hotel. But despite his discontent with the way things were going, he stood up and greeted the U.N.C.L.E. Chief Enforcement Agent cordially enough.

"Any development?" Napoleon asked casually.

"My suspicions regarding your amorous lady were confirmed by the fingerprint experts," Major Klima said. "I'll do my best to have her located as speedily as possible. For some inexplicable reason, this lady succeeded in living somewhere in town without being registered with the police. But don't worry, Mr. Solo, we'll find her."

Major Klima confirmed Napoleon's conclusion that the woman was a female THRUSH. In all probability, she was resident at the THRUSH European Center E, otherwise she would not be able to live anywhere in Prague without police registration. He kept the thought to himself and felt almost certain that all efforts to find her would be as futile as was the search for Professor Novak and his daughter.

"You hit your two would-be assailants mighty hard, Mr. Solo," Major Klima added. "They only came round an hour or so ago."

"Did interrogation bring anything to light?"

"Not a thing," the Czech frowned. "They've chosen to remain silent, but will probably change their minds when they've been in the cells long enough—not that this helps us at the moment."

"Any news of the body that walked out of the public mortuary?" Napoleon queried.

"No news," Major Klima grumbled. "We have thoroughly questioned all the mortuary staff, all of them conscientious and reliable people, but no one saw or heard a thing."

"Well, Major, there's not much point in my keeping you any longer," Napoleon said, seeing that with the present unsatisfactory state of affairs the Czech felt somewhat uneasy in his company. "I'll be in touch."

"Please do, and let's hope I have better news next time."

Napoleon checked various possible clues but none led him closer to THRUSH European Center E. His investigations led him all over Prague and he found walking on uneven cobblestones tiring. When he finally returned to his hotel room late evening, he felt the need of a hot bath before food or more work. He was about to step into the hot water when the call-sign of his radio receiver started to bleep. He

extracted the gadget from his pocket and opened the receiving channel.

"Napoleon," Illya said.

"Yes, where are you, Illya?"

"In Prague. At the Hotel Paris near Powder Tower."

"Can you come to the Axa Hotel in Poric Street?"

"When?"

"In ten minutes."

Napoleon switched off the receiver and stepped into the bath. The hot water was soothing and he wished Illya wasn't coming so soon—he would have liked a long, long soak.

Illya arrived and looked with envy at his colleague now sitting in his room in a comfortable dressing gown. "Some people seem to have all the luck," he said with a grin.

"The THRUSH Center can't be too far away from where I lost contact with the direction finder," Illya explained after a while. "I'll double-check the whole area on both banks of the Moldau to find a lead to their Headquarters."

"Let's hope their detection devices haven't discovered and silenced the direction finder," Napoleon said.

"I don't think they have," Illya said confidently. "Their devices work on different frequencies to ours."

"I wouldn't rely on it too much."

"Perhaps I shouldn't; but then I'm an optimist." They parted later—and Illya returned to the river bank of the Moldau at the point where the road turned inland sharply, while Napoleon again crisscrossed Prague, hoping to hit on an accidental clue.

The first real break came early that evening.

As Napoleon turned from Prikopy Street into Wenceslas Square, his eyes detected *the* girl standing at a tram stop. Beside her was the man from the airport reception area. There was no possibility of a mistake—they were in full view and he could see them clearly.

Napoleon dived into the entrance of the corner shop to prevent his being spotted by them. He considered whether to communicate with Major Klima but dismissed the thought and decided to follow the pair himself. If need be, he could always call for the Major's assistance later.

A tram with a trailer carriage drew up at the stop and the two boarded the front vehicle. Napoleon mingled with the dense stream of pedestrians, crossed the street towards the island stop in the middle, and managed to board the trailer unnoticed. From his seat he could see them in the front carriage.

The tram journey dragged on and on until they were out of the inner city and well into the suburbs. The pair in the now almost empty

front carriage appeared to be engrossed in their evening papers.

As the tram approached the second stop from the last, he saw them prepare to alight. He swiftly stood up and, about fifty yards from the stop, jumped off the fast-moving vehicle. He had to take the precaution— in this completely deserted suburban street they were almost certain to notice him if he left the trailer at the stop.

While the tram driver reduced speed and brought the vehicle to a halt, Napoleon stepped behind a thick tree on the pavement to conceal himself from view. He was only just in time, for seconds later he saw the man scan every direction, obviously checking.

Napoleon shadowed them from a safe distance as they walked along the empty streets without talking to each other. Not once did they look back to see if they were being followed.

They reached the last house of the built-up area, then continued along a dusty path into the country side. It was now almost pitch dark and there were heavy rain clouds. Napoleon was pleased for this gave him added cover. The darkness was actually an ally.

The pair headed for the Moldau, and climbed down the grass-covered embankment to the river shore. A sudden break in the clouds bathed the scene in silvery light. Napoleon slid behind a dense bush and watched them walk along the riverbank. It occurred to him that the spot could not be too far from the area where Illya had lost contact with the direction finder on the previous night.

Almost as they reached the bend where the Moldau turned in a northerly direction, they stopped. Napoleon's view was obscured by some high foliage, but he heard the sound of a boat being dragged over stony ground, and soon afterwards there came the unmistakable noise of rowing oars. He saw a small boat moving across the river towards the far shore.

Napoleon watched it through his binoculars and was surprised when it stopped alongside an almost vertical rock formation covered with moss and small vegetation. He was even more surprised when he saw a section of the rock slide to one side to enable the boat to enter what was obviously a secret water passage. Immediately the boat had entered, the ingenious stone door shut and the massive rock looked as impenetrable as before.

This must be the way into the THRUSH European Center, he thought. He activated his ultra-shortwave radio transmitter-receiver to give Alexander Waverly this new information, and when Channel D was closed again, walked along the riverbank searching for a boat in which to cross the river.

About half a mile from the spot where the two THRUSH agents had boarded their rowing boat, he found a kayak lying on the grass verge some twenty feet from the river. He lifted the light boat, carried

it to the water, boarded it, and steered towards the rock formation on the far bank.

As he reached the rock the clouds began to close in again on the moonlight, but before darkness engulfed him he located a small lever in a crevice beneath a layer of artificial moss. He tried to turn it, without success. Perhaps it was locked by a safety device from the inside? He extracted a small electronic gadget from one of his pockets. It was constructed to open any lock silently.

He was in the process of fastening the opener to the lever when the river currents moved the kayak from the rock. To keep the boat in position, he grabbed the lever with his left hand and unintentionally pulled it. The rock slid aside. The door had been constructed from steel and made to look like a genuine continuation of the moss-covered rock formation.

He steered the kayak into the inky black manmade underground tunnel and reflected that it was similar to the underwater channel entrance to U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters. As soon as the kayak passed the door, it automatically shut.

He was alarmed that this entrance door was operated by electronic eyes, knowing this could have set off an alarm. To bypass concealed alarm devices along the underground channel, he switched on his electronic diversion device, which temporarily put out of action any alarm network.

His eyes grew accustomed to the darkness and he was able to see the straight walls and roof of the tunnel, his nostrils conscious of a musty smell.

Some five hundred yards or so on, the channel ended in some steps rising to a platform.

Napoleon fastened the kayak to the rowing boat left by the two THRUSH agents, and noted a powerful small motorboat moored alongside it. He climbed the stone steps to the platform; this opened into a long corridor that veered to the right. He moved silently along the dark passage and noted that it descended slightly. He kept his electronic diversion device working continuously to ensure that no alarm system betrayed him, but wondered as he went on how long it would be before concealed steel arms, or something or someone, emerged from the walls to hold him in an iron grip. As if responding to his thoughts, a tubular steel net dropped from the ceiling, pressing his arms against his body, thus making any movement impossible.

"Welcome to THRUSH Headquarters, Mr. Solo," a voice said as blazing lights flooded the passage.

It took a few moments for his temporarily blinded eyes to adjust before he could see what was obviously a THRUSH officer and guards.

"Had you advised us that you wanted to visit us, we would have

told you where to find our main entrance, which is much more respectable," the Chief Organizing Officer smiled.

"I didn't want to trespass on your kindness," Napoleon said wryly.

"We'll take these uncomfortable things off you and show you the way to our more civilized quarters," the THRUSH executive said.

Two guards removed the steel net from Solo; at the same time they removed his gun and emptied his pockets. When Napoleon held out his arms for handcuffing, the officer said:

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Solo. We don't copy U.N.C.L.E. methods."

Beside the THRUSH executive, and flanked by guards at the front and rear, Napoleon continued along the brightly-lit concrete passageway until they reached the end. A wall moved automatically aside to let them enter a square room where an elevator was ready for the next stage.

"We'll have a little chat, Mr. Solo, which, I trust, will be fruitful," the Chief Organizing Officer said as they stepped into the elevator. "I have long wanted an opportunity to meet you."

"So have I." Napoleon forced another smile.

He realized that he could do no more at present than play cat and mouse, but the knowledge that the guards had not, as yet, discovered some of the emergency tools concealed in his tie, suit lining, shoes and cufflinks, gave him hope that he was not as yet altogether helpless.

As they stepped from the elevator and turned left, the head of the Special Tasks Department emerged from one of the doors along the corridor. Seeing Napoleon, he drew his gun.

"Put it away," the Chief Organizing Officer said coolly. "We don't want Mr. Solo dead. We have better plans for him." And, as he led Napoleon into his office, he explained: "It would be foolish to kill you, Mr. Solo. Murder is such a messy business. I prefer everything to be nice and smooth."

"Oh, I do so agree with you," concurred Napoleon heartily.

They entered the THRUSH executive's office and as the officer seated himself at the desk, he invited Solo to make himself comfortable.

"Now, don't let's mince words," he said. "We are preparing to dispose of U.N.C.L.E. and I intend to let you play a considerable part in its destruction."

"That sounds most interesting," Napoleon said.

"It is much more than interesting, Mr. Solo; it is at long last the beginning of a new world—a THRUSH world. The actual execution of our 'Operation U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters' is now almost only a mere formality."

"Do go on—I find this fascinating."

"Cynicism won't get you far, Mr. Solo," the THRUSH executive snarled abruptly. "Nothing can save U.N.C.L.E. from being wiped out. And, to make extra sure, we now have Professor Novak's apparatus. He is already working on the extension of its operating radius."

"It could take ages before he finds the solution," Napoleon cut in.

"We are ready for such an eventuality. Our own scientists and technicians have solved some of the shortcomings of Professor Novak's thought-transference apparatus, and if he and his daughter, supported by our own experts, cannot achieve unlimited distance within the next twenty-four hours, we shall nevertheless use Professor Novak's thought-transference apparatus for the successful conditioning of the brains of all U.N.C.L.E. personnel to surrender unconditionally."

"How are you so certain you can do it?" Napoleon enquired.

"Our agent has installed specially constructed electronic beam receivers onto the entire internal communications systems at U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters. These receivers can pick up the beam from our transmitter, which will be linked with Professor Novak's apparatus, and then our thought orders can be beamed over the internal communications systems to every U.N.C.L.E. officer, beginning with Alexander Waverly and Illya Kuryakin down to the least important clerk and messenger. Brilliant, isn't it?"

"How do you know your agent has, in fact, carried out your plan?" Napoleon asked.

"That's no secret, either," the THRUSH executive boasted. "When our agent fixed the last electronic beam receiver on the internal communications systems at U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, he was, unfortunately, detected and caught. In accordance with his instructions for such an eventuality, he took a special drug which killed him temporarily. Your Mr. Waverly, or someone at U.N. Headquarters, had the body removed to some funeral directors in New York. One of our agents claimed the body, flew it here, and it arrived safely last night. The dead agent was revived and reported that he had successfully carried out his task. So you see, Mr. Solo, we know for sure that everything is set for action."

"Why tell me all this?"

"Because I want you to be in the picture. You see, Mr. Solo, you are going to play an important part in our operation."

"Oh?"

"You are going to tell your Alexander Waverly that you are with us, that we hold all the trumps, and that the time for unconditional surrender has come. You are to tell him that all U.N.C.L.E. files and secret gadgets, including weapons, must be destroyed forthwith and that he and the entire U.N.C.L.E. staff are to surrender to us. You will convince him that we are always ready to recruit personnel with

ability and brains and that Waverly, Kuryakin and the rest of the U.N.C.L.E. team will find excellent opportunities with THRUSH."

"And if I refuse?"

"But, my dear Mr. Solo, are you in a position to refuse? Do you think I would have taken the trouble to get you here if I thought I couldn't use you? You have no alternative but to do as I say."

"And if I refuse, you'll kill me..."

"I told you earlier that I don't favor that sort of thing. I prefer smoother methods."

"How can you force me to do something I am determined not to do?"

"I have Professor Novak's thought-transference apparatus. I can make you do anything I want."

"Rubbish!"

The THRUSH executive switched on the closed circuit television system. Instantly the workroom in which Professor Novak and his daughter were busy with a box that looked like a portable radio set appeared on the screen. "Bring the Professor and his apparatus to my office," he ordered.

"Very well," the supervisor acknowledged.

"You will now have the opportunity to learn the efficiency of the thought-transference apparatus," Napoleon was informed.

He stayed silent. He considered the position—"even if the Professor's machine turns me into their tool, Waverly still won't take notice of what I tell him," he thought.

Professor Novak entered the office, the supervisor carrying his apparatus.

"I am happy to see you looking so well, Professor," the Chief Organizing Officer greeted him.

"I'm afraid, sir, the radius is still not unlimited," the scientist said, thinking he had been brought for a progress report.

"This is not my concern at the moment," the THRUSH executive assured him. "I want you to demonstrate your apparatus in my office and to transfer my thoughts to this gentleman to illustrate the effectiveness of your apparatus."

"Very well," the scientist said; "at such short range it will work to full satisfaction."

He positioned the apparatus so that one of the knobs was aimed at Napoleon, then turned some dials, checked an indicator, and finally told the Chief Organizing Office that everything was ready for his experiment.

The THRUSH executive started to condition Napoleon's mind.

"Do you remember what I told you earlier about the message I want you to send to Waverly?" he said as soon as the Professor had

departed.

"Yes, sir," Napoleon said. "Can I have the transmitter, please?"

Napoleon asked for Channel D to be opened. When Waverly replied, Napoleon repeated what he had been persuaded to say.

"This is not the time for practical jokes, Mr. Solo," Waverly said dryly.

"It's no joke, sir," Napoleon insisted. "Everything's as I told you and I can only repeat, you must heed my advice."

"Are you out of your mind, Mr. Solo?"

"No, sir. I am at THRUSH European Center E and I have ascertained that everything is as I told you. If you want to survive and save all the others, do as I tell you. There is no alternative."

Waverly closed Channel D. The Chief Organizing Officer was pleased with Napoleon and told him so.

"What do you wish me to do now, sir?" Napoleon asked.

"You can rest now. When you're needed again I'll call you."

Napoleon was led out of the office by a guard and taken to a room similar to the one allocated to Professor Novak. Only the dividing wall separated him from the Czech scientist, but Napoleon did not know this fact.

He looked around the room. It was comfortable, although there were no windows and the door had been locked from the outside. He settled into an armchair and tried to figure out whether Professor Novak's thought-transference apparatus had actually conditioned his mind to think completely on THRUSH lines or whether it had confined itself to his sending the crucial surrender message to Waverly. He decided that the conditioning had only partly influenced him, because he still felt loyal to U.N.C.L.E., determined to play his part in destroying THRUSH. He decided he would utilize the fact that his mind had been conditioned to pretend a devotion to THRUSH.

He was anxious to tell Illya the location of THRUSH European Center E and warn him that the U.N.C.L.E. diversion devices were ineffective on THRUSH'S alarm system. With his ultra-shortwave transmitter out of his possession he hadn't the means of calling Illya, although he still had the emergency short-distance transmitter-receiver safely concealed in his cufflinks. But unless Illya happened to be really near, he still would not be able to make contact.

Napoleon sat in the armchair and repeated patiently into the transmitter:

"Illya, I'm calling you."

Napoleon tried the radio call again and again over a period of hours without result. Illya was probably miles away from the area, he thought.

Before giving up for the night he tried once more. "Illya, I'm

calling you."

"I can hear you," Kuryakin's voice replied suddenly.

"Good," Napoleon said. "I've been trying to locate you for hours."

"Where are you?" Illya enquired.

"At THRUSH European Center E. That's why I can't use the normal transmitter. They've got it."

"Are you all right, Napoleon?"

"Yes."

"Waverly told me about your curious radio message."

"Oh that... They conditioned my mind to do it. But that's irrelevant now—I'll explain another time. THRUSH European Center E is close to where you lost contact with the direction finder..."

He described the exact location and then warned Illya not to enter the underground channel.

"Look for a more suitable entrance, and remember that our standard alarm diversion instrument is useless. Use the alternative device, and good luck, Illya."

Napoleon's luck was in. No one at THRUSH European Center E had monitored his broadcast.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ACTION STATIONS!

ILLYA systematically worked his way along the river bank of the Moldau. According to Napoleon's information, he should be in the immediate vicinity of the concealed water entrance to THRUSH European Center E, but he was still unable to re-establish contact with the bugging devices on the coffin and in the agent's belt, or the direction finder concealed in the tooth of the "dead" THRUSH officer.

When he reached the massive rock formation, he examined every inch of it and eventually found the ingenious entrance. He pulled the lever in the crevice and the steel door silently slid aside. But he did not enter the underground passage; instead he fixed a gadget inside the tunnel. This should deceive the electronic eyes and make them shut the door again when he issued the appropriate beam from his transmitter anywhere.

He climbed back along the edge of the rock formation and made his way back inland. He reached a building that looked like a porter's lodge of the mansion house on the hill. There was no sign of life in the building, but he was careful as he approached it silently. It could be a well-camouflaged warning post for THRUSH Headquarters.

As he approached the solid oak door of the building, he suddenly heard a faint signal from the direction finder and knew he was on the right track.

He switched on the multi-beam device to put out of action any alarms, and then opened the door, which he relocked as soon as he was inside. He found himself in a small hall with several doors. As he stood there, considering which door to open first, the signal from the direction finder increased in strength as he leaned towards a door on the right.

He unlocked it and stepped cautiously into the almost dark room. He could see that the windows were shuttered with heavy steel plates. The room was bare and appeared to be deserted, yet the direction finder signal became stronger still as he moved to the middle of the room, otherwise he would have thought he was in the wrong place.

His detector instrument helped him locate a door concealed in a wall. Before attempting to open it, he tested the room thoroughly for alarm traps.

On the wall between the two steel-shuttered windows he found another hidden door, on which he used his unlocking device. It housed a small box that obviously contained alarm controls. He stood his directional torch on the floor and used it to spotlight the control

box. Examination indicated that it was a key control box of the alarm system. He disconnected the wiring without sparking the alarm circuit—at least, he felt sure he had managed to do this effectively.

He felt more confident now of being able to penetrate undetected THRUSH European Center E, but was still careful when it came to opening the concealed door in the wall. He entered an adequately lit passage which was ahead of him. Before he entered he transmitted an electronic beam onto the steel door in the rock formation on the riverbank of the Moldau. The control signal on his device told him that the electronic eyes responded to his beam transmission and the door was being shut automatically. THRUSH would now think someone had just entered the water tunnel.

He closed the door behind him and walked along the passage. Meanwhile alarm lights activated by the riverbank door had alerted the Duty Officer in the Internal Security Center. "There's an intruder in the underground water channel," he informed both the Chief of the Special Tasks Department and the Chief Organizing Officer over the internal communications system.

"I'll have the guards seal off the whole southern area," the Chief of the Special Tasks Department said, and immediately arranged this. "We'll soon have him, or them."

"I want that Solo fellow removed from his room and taken to a safer place," the Chief Organizing Officer ordered. "This renewed penetration into our area indicates that they know of the water approach and might perhaps land considerable forces to free him."

"Even a battalion of heavily armed intruders wouldn't get far," the Chief of the Special Tasks Department said confidently. "How could anyone penetrate the death ray screen?"

"They might be equipped against such things. One never knows."

"You're over-careful," the Chief of the Special Tasks Department retorted. "But I'll increase the number of guards to the southern area anyway and concentrate the majority of our security forces there. Does that make you happier?"

"It does. But I still want Solo in a safer place."

"I'll shift him to the dungeon immediately. He won't walk out from there..."

The Special Tasks Department Chief and four guards headed for Napoleon, who was in his bed, asleep. They roused him roughly and ordered him to dress.

"Surely it's not breakfast time already?" Napoleon said, as he complied with their request.

"Come on!" the officer bellowed impatiently. Napoleon was led along corridors to an elevator that took them several floors down to a tunnel with massive steel doors. A guard unlocked one door and

pushed Napoleon in. "I hope you'll find it comfortable," the officer said cynically as the door was banged shut.

The dimly lit, windowless cell looked as if it had been hewn from solid rock. It also looked escape-proof. But Solo still had his tried and trusty allies—his emergency tools, although it was too soon even to try anything, for they were sure to be extra alert for the first few hours.

He sat on the rough wooden bunk, held his cuff links near his mouth and repeated softly:

"Illya! Are you around, Illya?"

There was no response.

He decided to try again later.

Illya heard Napoleon's whispered voice coming from his cufflink but did not dare to answer, afraid that detectors might pick up the conversation and transmit it to THRUSH Headquarters monitoring room. He could not afford to take chances. He did not like leaving Napoleon in suspense but it was too dangerous to risk possibly centering attention on himself. Napoleon would have to wait until it was safe for him to contact him.

He continued along the passage, his eyes examining every inch of the tunnel for danger points.

At a spot where the underground corridor turned sharply, he discovered an almost unnoticeable interruption in the smooth concrete floor. The area was about a yard wide and stretched from wall to wall. He stepped over it, being careful not to touch it. A foot or so on he discovered steel objects on both walls of the narrow passageway. He suspected these to be steel arms that would have been set in motion if some one stepped on the yard-wide area in the floor. Those arms could hold an intruder firmly until guards were automatically summoned. He had come across such devices on other assignments. He then detected the steel net in the roof of the passage, which fell down on a victim when the steel arms went into action. He was not to know it was an identical net that had put Napoleon temporarily out of business.

He stopped when he heard a voice just ahead saying:

"There's a full-scale emergency at the southern area water entrance. If there's any warning of intrusion on your monitoring screen raise the alarm immediately."

"Message understood, sir," a voice replied. "There hasn't been any sign of danger in my sector as yet. The system is in perfect working order. I'm checking the control indicator every minute."

Illya was delighted with this unexpected duty routine communication call. It had usefully warned him of what was going on. From where he stood, the passage looked as though he was

approaching another turn and he had not expected a guard to be waiting there.

He neared the spot with added care, ready for anything.

As he reached the bend in the corridor, he eased, looked round, and was in luck. The uniformed guard had turned his back towards him, busy checking an instrument board. Illya jumped and aimed a short hard blow at the neck of the unsuspecting THRUSH guard. He caught the unconscious body to prevent it from falling on the desk and possibly setting off some emergency alarm signal.

He dealt with the alarms which guarded the approach to the heart of the THRUSH stronghold, then deprived the guard of his uniform and slipped into it. He wanted to be able to move freely inside THRUSH European Center E. He gagged the unconscious guard and tied his hands and feet securely to the heavy steel tubes which supported the instrument desk.

Now ready for new emergencies, he stepped into a small hall which had an elevator on the left. He pressed a button and a red arrow pointing downwards was illuminated. The elevator descended. A few seconds later the door opened automatically and he stepped into it. The door closed behind him and the elevator immediately ascended at considerable speed. As there were no buttons to be pressed inside, he realized he was being taken directly to the main area.

It stopped and the door opened. He expected someone to be waiting for him, but there was no one in the well-lit corridor that faced him.

As he moved along it, he wondered where he would find Professor Novak and his daughter, as his first duty was to seize the thought-transference apparatus before THRUSH could make disastrous use of it. As he reached a T junction, two uniformed THRUSH officers emerged from the room by the junction. He heard one of them say: "I'll take care of the Professor and his apparatus and you see to his daughter." They hadn't even glanced at Illya, and didn't seem to suspect him when he followed.

They paused at a door and the guard inside the workroom let them enter. Before he was able to shut the door again, Illya silenced him with a blow and dragged him behind a work bench. The two THRUSH officers walked towards the Professor and his daughter, completely unaware of what had happened behind them. Illya assumed the role of the unconscious guard and closed the door.

"Professor Novak," said one of the THRUSH men, "we want you to see the Chief Organizing Officer."

"A moment, please," the scientist said. "My daughter is just testing an improvement I have made."

"Your daughter can experiment with the apparatus later," the man barked. "At the moment we are faced with a full-scale emergency and we need your apparatus for dealing with intruders."

"What's the good of the apparatus if it doesn't work properly?" Professor Novak cried. "With the adjustment I have just made, and which I want my daughter to check, I am uncertain whether I haven't impaired its previous effectiveness."

"Your apparatus had better work, Professor," the officer bellowed. "While I take you and your apparatus to the Chief Organizing Officer, my colleague will hold your daughter in this room as hostage..."

That was as far as he went. Illya, who had moved behind him, knocked him unconscious with a brutal blow on his neck, and as he collapsed, his colleague, taken by surprise, never even got the opportunity to counterattack. Illya's hand moved quicker than the second THRUSH man's thoughts, and he went down, too.

"You and your daughter have nothing to fear, Professor Novak," Illya said, as he disarmed and tied the THRUSH officers to ensure that they stayed out of action. "I am here to help you and get you back to your villa and safety."

Professor Novak and his daughter looked at him unbelievably.

"Don't be deceived by my uniform," he reassured them. "It was only borrowed to enable me to move around this place easily."

He disconnected the internal communications system to prevent anyone outside observing or hearing what was going on in the room.

"Can we help?" Professor Novak asked.

"I hope you can," Illya replied. "I should like you to have your thought-transference apparatus in perfect working order as quickly as possible."

"How do I know I can trust you?" the scientist said cautiously. "How do I know you are not someone who wants to gain personal power and use my apparatus for evil?"

"You, not me, Professor Novak, will give the thought-transference orders to your captors to surrender," said Illya. "You may be more convinced that I am genuine when, in a moment, you hear me communicating with my superior." He removed his transmitter-receiver from his pocket and said in a clear voice: "Open Channel D."

The Professor and his daughter looked at each other.

"Yes?" Waverly replied as Channel D opened. "I am with Professor Novak and his daughter inside THRUSH European Center E." He gave a precise description of the exact location of the enemy's stronghold and how it could be approached. He went on: "I need urgent reinforcements to seal off and take care of THRUSH European Center E."

"I'll see to that," Waverly said. "Where is Mr. Solo?"

"I haven't had the chance to find him yet, sir. First priority was to make sure that the two Czechs and their apparatus were safe."

"I look forward to an early report from Mr. Solo, too," Waverly said before closing Channel D.

"I think we can trust you," Professor Novak said as Illya replaced the transmitter-receiver in his pocket. "My daughter and I shall do our utmost to have the apparatus operating as fast as possible."

"I'll have to leave now because I must find my colleague, who is a prisoner somewhere here," Illya said. "But don't worry. Lock yourself in and no one will get to you." As he was about to go, he held his cufflink to his mouth and said: "Napoleon, can you hear me?"

"Yes, Illya, and I have heard everything that was said," Solo replied. "There's no need to rescue me, I am already out of my dungeon and on my way to you. These apes forgot to take all my tools away."

The Chief Organizing Officer felt uneasy when the Special Tasks officer failed to arrive with the Professor and his apparatus. To find out what was going on in the workroom, he switched on the closed circuit television, but the screen remained blank. He connected with Technical Control and told them angrily:

"Check communications to the workroom and report at once what's wrong!"

"Both the audio and vision communication lines to the workroom are dead, sir," the Technical Control officer reported. "Communication will be restored as soon as practicable."

"See to it fast! It's urgent!" the Chief Organizing Officer said, and disconnected himself.

He was about to summon guards to investigate when the Duty Officer of Internal Security appeared on the television screen.

"The U.N.C.L.E. prisoner's escaped from the dungeon cell, sir," he reported. "He's blown up the two guards who were on duty at the top-security prison wing."

"Where is he now?" the THRUSH executive yelled. "I want him immediately!"

"The entire Center is being searched, sir."

"I want him alive and I want him here—and quickly!"

"Yes, sir."

"I also want you to investigate whether there's anything wrong in the workroom and I want to know fast!"

"Yes, sir."

Napoleon was traveling in the elevator to the seventh floor of the Center. He knew exactly where to go, for Illya had given him the layout via his cufflink transmitter-receiver.

When the elevator reached the seventh floor and Napoleon

stepped into the corridor, four THRUSH guards faced him with drawn guns. Knowing that there was no hope of escaping re-arrest by trying to shoot it out, he snatched the plastic explosive handkerchief from his pocket and threw it towards them. He managed to dive behind a steel pillar before the handkerchief bomb exploded and scattered the men.

Napoleon hurled himself through the explosion cloud and ran along the condor, ready for any other attack. He reached the door of the workroom and gave a prearranged signal. As Illya opened the heavy door, Napoleon spotted two groups of guards heading for them. He threw another plastic explosive handkerchief into their path, before diving into the workroom to shelter from the blast.

Out of breath, Napoleon asked Illya for his transmitter-receiver. He requested Channel D, and immediately it was opened Waverly answered.

"Everything's under control, sir," Napoleon reported. "I propose now to call Major Klima of Czech State Security..."

"Czech State Security and our own forces are already on the way, Mr. Solo," Waverly cut in. "Expect them any moment. And, Mr. Solo," he added before closing Channel D, "don't forget to recover your own transmitter-receiver. We can't have our precious equipment lying around all over the place."

The Professor and Vlasta were still busy with the apparatus. "We should be ready any moment now," the scientist assured the two U.N.C.L.E. men.

"We'd better order the THRUSH executives and personnel to surrender," Illya said. He restored the two-way internal communications system and was about to pull the switches which put the workroom on to all closed circuit television screens throughout THRUSH European Center E.

"Shouldn't you take off your fancy dress?" Napoleon pointed at the THRUSH uniform Illya was still wearing.

Illya took off the outfit, threw it at the THRUSH officers still lying unconscious on the floor, and announced: "I resign!"

Over the closed circuit television, Illya declared:

"Gentlemen—it's time to surrender!"

Defiantly, the Chief Organizing Officer shouted: "I have ordered gas to be pumped into the workroom through the air-conditioning plant."

"Now, now," Napoleon countered. "This is no time for threats. We have the thought-transference apparatus and Professor Novak is about to condition your minds to surrender. In addition, THRUSH European Center E is surrounded by U.N.C.L.E. and Czech State Security forces..."

"They will be too late to save you, Mr. Solo," the THRUSH

executive replied. "Before they have the chance to reach you, you'll be beyond help. You won't get out alive. Our technicians have jammed your door, but should you succeed in opening it, explosive charges will deal with that eventuality."

A moment later the entire internal communications system went dead; then the light went out in the workroom.

"Try to condition their minds to surrender, Professor Novak, by aiming your apparatus in all directions where the enemy can be," Napoleon ordered. Then he helped Illya to seal the air conditioning inlets to stop the threatened gas from entering, realizing all too well that their efforts might be insufficient to succeed in doing this.

CHAPTER NINE

HEADING FOR THE LAST ROUND-UP

THE special U.N.C.L.E. forces, reinforced by battalions of uniformed and plainclothes Czech State Security commandos, encircled the area of THRUSH European Center E. Units penetrated the underground water channel from the Moldau, while at the same time other detachments went through the entrance Illya had already found. Further units broke into the well-camouflaged passageway behind the stables of the mansion house on the hilltop. It was a full-scale military operation.

When the detachments that entered the Center through the underground water channel reached the platform at the end, the voice of the Chief of THRUSH'S Special Tasks Department shouted through an amplifier:

"Lay down your arms and surrender! Your escape route is cut off and you are trapped!"

The combined U.N.C.L.E. and Czech State Security officers ignored the surrender warning and continued to penetrate into the stronghold.

Machine-gun fire brought down some of the advancing men. A high-explosive plastic missile was thrown among the THRUSH guards who barred the way into their Headquarters.

Meanwhile the U.N.C.L.E. and Czech State Security forces that had penetrated the fortress from the camouflaged entrance on the top of the hill reached the battle area and cut off the escape route of the THRUSH guards there. Caught between the two detachments, these were disarmed and handcuffed.

The way was now open to search the Center for the remaining executives, officers and men, and liberate Napoleon, Illya, the Novaks, and possibly other unknown prisoners as well. The vastness of the underground stronghold and the need to open so many heavy steel doors with explosives made this a very slow operation.

Napoleon, Illya, the Professor and his daughter pressed wet handkerchiefs over their nostrils and mouths as a precaution against the gas seeping into the room. They all knew that if help didn't come soon, it would be too late to save them.

Napoleon and Illya made several attempts to blow a hole through the wall near the door to let fresh air in, but their attempts were futile. They did not dare fix strong charges, otherwise they might be killed by the blast.

The situation was desperate. Breathing was becoming almost

impossible in the by now gas-filled room.

"I am going to blow the door lock," Napoleon decided. "If there are explosive charges outside and blowing the lock tears us all to pieces, well, it's just another and quicker way of dying."

"You are right. We have nothing to lose—the gas will kill us slowly anyway," Professor Novak agreed weakly.

Illya helped Napoleon position the explosive charge and then they crouched with the Professor and Vlasta in a corner, using the bodies of the three THRUSH officers as well as the metal workbench as extra protective cover against the blast.

"Here we go!" said Napoleon, and detonated the charge.

It sounded like a whole battery of explosive detonating in rapid succession. The heavy steel door disintegrated and the blast flattened almost everything in the workroom, but miraculously seemed to miss the corner where they crouched.

Napoleon and Illya helped Professor Novak and Vlasta from the shattered room and pulled them into the corridor and its cool fresh air. They stood there gulping in the air, trying to cleanse their lungs of the gas.

"The apparatus!" Vlasta cried. "We left it behind!" The two U.N.C.L.E. men went back into the room, looking everywhere for the thought-transference machine. They saw fragments of it scattered everywhere and knew that it had been destroyed by the explosion.

"I don't know how my father will take it," said Vlasta, who had followed them into the room. "I only hope its destruction won't break his heart..."

"What is it, my child?" asked the Professor from the corridor.

Vlasta stepped back into the passage and cried anxiously: "Are you all right, father?"

Napoleon and Illya saw the scientist sitting with his back against the wall. Illya loosened his collar and tie and said: "Breathe deeply, Professor."

"I am all right," the scientist said. "I only feel a little weak. It's not surprising, after all the excitement I'm not as young as you are..."

Vlasta knelt beside her father and caressed his head lovingly, fighting to keep back her tears.

"What did you say in the room, my child?" the Professor asked.

"Not now, father..."

"It's the apparatus, isn't it?"

She didn't answer.

"Don't worry," he said, and looked into her eyes. "I pray that the apparatus is destroyed beyond recognition."

"Why? Why?" Vlasta exclaimed. "It was your life's ambition."

"Yes—until I came here," he admitted. "When I discovered how it

could be abused, I hated ever having devised and perfected it. I am happy it has gone."

Napoleon wandered off, searching for the office of the Chief Organizing Officer. He had a bill to settle, and he also wanted to recover his transmitter-receiver.

When he reached the deserted corridor in which the THRUSH executive's office was located, he found the steel door shut. Indeed, it appeared as though this whole part of European Center E had been abandoned.

He removed an electronic opening device from its hiding place in his left heel and unlocked the steel door. He entered the office, to find the Chief Organizing Officer with his back towards him, busily engaged in disguising his appearance before a cabinet mirror.

Napoleon locked the door behind him to cut off the escape route.

"I've already told you it was time to surrender," Napoleon said.

The THRUSH executive whirled round. "Solo! How did you get out?"

"Through the door," he answered teasingly, enjoying the other's bewilderment. "All your explosive charges and other friendly ideas, like gas being pumped into the room and so on, were quite ineffective against our protective and combat devices."

"Well, let's see how effectively you can protect yourself against this, Mr. Solo," the THRUSH executive said threateningly, pointing the gun in his right hand at Napoleon. "It was obliging of you to come to my office. I am sure U.N.C.L.E. and Czech State Security will gladly trade you in for my freedom."

"Throw your toy gun away; it's useless," Napoleon bluffed. In that moment he aimed the electronic opening device he had been holding in the palm of his hand ever since he had entered the office at the THRUSH executive. "With this ray gun I can wipe you out and burn your body to cinders."

The Organizing Officer's hand trembled as he pulled on his automatic. The noise of the shot filled the room. His nervousness made the bullet miss Napoleon by a fraction of an inch, enabling the latter to jump at the THRUSH executive and knock the weapon from his hand, his left foot kicking the automatic out of reach.

The other was powerfully built and Napoleon needed all his karate knowledge to combat him. He threw his attacker and made his head crash against the oversized desk in the office. He took advantage of this to hit him on the throat with all his strength. The man crumpled without a sound.

Napoleon stood a moment to recover his own balance, then bent to tie up the man. He found this unnecessary, for he was dead.

He discovered his transmitter-receiver in the desk drawer. Then

he switched on the closed circuit television screens throughout the Center to announce:

"This is an ultimatum for all THRUSH executives, officers, armed guards and other personnel, to surrender unconditionally. THRUSH European Center E is completely surrounded and all escape routes are sealed off. The Chief Organizing Officer is overpowered, as you can see for yourself if you look at him lying on the floor of his office, and European Center E is deprived of its leader. We want to prevent bloodshed, but will not hesitate to retaliate against anyone offering resistance. You are all advised to lay down your arms at once and surrender."

Napoleon was unaware that this ultimatum was late, the U.N.C.L.E. and Czech State Security forces having already broken all resistance; indeed, full-scale mopping-up operations throughout the vast underground network were now in progress.

As he left the dead leader's office and went to rejoin Illya and the Novaks, he met a group of U.N.C.L.E. officers.

"Mr. Solo," one of them said, "we have been looking for you. The doctor wants to see you urgently, to check the effect of the gas on you."

"Right," Napoleon said, and followed him to the elevator.

They arrived a few floors down and walked towards the Medical Room. As they passed a group of THRUSH guards and personnel who were being escorted by Czech State Security officers, Napoleon stopped—the woman from the restaurant and the agent from airport were among the prisoners. The woman looked away when their eyes met for a moment. U.N.C.L.E.'S Medical Officer examined Solo and declared: "There's nothing wrong that the antidote wouldn't put right instantly," and dug a hypodermic needle into Napoleon's arm pressing a liquid into his bloodstream.

"How are Illya and the Novaks?" Napoleon enquired.

"Fine," the doctor confirmed. "The old man was rather shaken and might have been knocked out for good by the gas, but THRUSH's own antidote is superb and counteracts all the effects of the poisoning instantly. We should be grateful to them for a well-equipped Medical Room."

Napoleon arrived in the main area of the Center to find Professor Novak and Vlasta, accompanied by Illya, ready to depart.

"Will you join us, Napoleon?" Illya said. "We've arranged to celebrate the end of the affair in a good restaurant."

"I'd be delighted," he accepted, and turned towards Vlasta: "I'm looking forward to your company away from this place."

"I am sure you will be pleased to know that everyone has been dealt with and everything is under control, Mr. Solo," Major Klima

reported.

"I am glad to know it," the U.N.C.L.E. agent returned. "We are about to celebrate the occasion. Would you care to join us?"

"I'm afraid I can't," Major Klima said regretfully. "Duty calls..."

"I hope I shall be seeing you before I leave your lovely city," Napoleon said, sliding his hand under Vlasta's arm as he walked her towards the exit.

They arrived in a Czech State Security limousine at the Acropolis Restaurant and managed to secure a table at this popular establishment. The food was excellent, the wine superb. Napoleon hoped Waverly would agree to his spending a long overdue leave in Prague. He was about to lead Vlasta to the dance floor when the call indicator of the transmitter-receiver in his pocket began to bleep. He could have done without this kind of interruption.

"Excuse me a moment," he said to Vlasta, and took the instrument from his pocket to acknowledge the call.

"Mr. Solo," Waverly said from U.N.C.L.E. Head quarters. "I want you to leave. A plane will be available at Prague Airport in an hour."

"Yes, sir," Napoleon consented unhappily. "Is Mr. Kuryakin to accompany me?"

"He will wind up matters in Prague," Waverly said, and closed Channel D.

"I'm afraid, Miss Novak, we won't be able to have another dance, after all," Napoleon said regretfully. "I am leaving immediately."

"A pity," she said. "I enjoyed being with you."

"May I have the pleasure?" Illya stood up and bowed.

"I'd be delighted," Vlasta replied with a smile.

Napoleon was not in the best of spirits as he walked towards the restaurant door. But then he was accustomed to his personal plans being turned upside down. He felt a little better when, next day, Illya was ordered to join him. At least they were in the same boat together—they'd both have to do without Vlasta's company.

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